〆切前には
百合が捗る
はかど
2
平坂
Yomi Hirasaka
読
U35
イラスト
GA文庫

〆切前には百合が捗る2
はかど

須原朋香
［すはら・ともか］
人気声優。
朋香の姿が見えた瞬間、
会場全体から熱狂的な歓声が上がる。
朋香は満面の笑顔でそれを受け止め、
手にしたマイクを大きく振り上げたあと、
高らかに歌い始めた。
ライブ
GUEST

「あ、愛結、落ち着いて」
怪物誕生
「ぎゃお――」

白川愛結
［しらかわ・あゆ］
家出少女。
海老原優佳理
［えびわら・ゆかり］
小説家。
食べ歩き

Chapter 1: Excuses Toward the Editor Progress Right Before the Deadline

It was July 1st, a bit past 10 am. Shirakawa Ayu sat in the bullet train [Radiance] on her way to Tokyo all the way from Toyama. Next to her sat a woman so beautiful that she was like a goddess or angel, breathing faintly as she slept peacefully. Her name was Ebiwara Yukari. She is a novelist, Ayu's employer, her roommate—and lover.

—D-Did Sensei and I really…?

Even now, a part of Ayu was dubious about yesterday's events, wondering if it could have been a dream. Ayu is a lesbian, and when her friends told this to the people at her school around two months ago, it spread like wildfire until it led to her emotions exploding in a violent incident. Her parents showed no compassion for her situation either, so she ran away from her rural town and escaped to Tokyo all on her own. There, she went to her cousin Shirakawa Miyako, who worked at a publisher, which led to her meeting Yukari. It was love at first sight.

Ayu then ended up working as Yukari's caretaker and supervisor while living with her. They visited various places together, cooked together, and built a shelf and a herbarium. And as time passed on, Ayu's feelings for Yukari grew… until eventually, when they stayed at a hot spring inn the previous night, she confessed her feelings. She assumed that Yukari's reaction would be the same as her friends' and parents' back home. That she would be grossed out and reject Ayu. She assumed that she wouldn't be able to stay with Yukari any longer. And yet—

—Hey, Ayu-chan? Should we start dating?

It was like a miracle unfolding in front of her, and Ayu began bawling her eyes out, embracing Yukari's body. They then spent the night passionately

together, as if Ayu was desperate to see if this was all just a dream or not… Though Yukari's reactions toward the end were a bit too stimulating, so she might have overdone it. Ayu glanced over at Yukari's sleeping face, slowly reaching for her cheek. The moment her fingertip was about to touch her skin —Yukari's hand suddenly grabbed Ayu's wrist.

"Eeek?!"

Out of shock, Ayu shrieked, and Yukari gave her a teasing smile.

"Hee hee. What were you about to do just now, Ayu?"

"S-Sensei?! You're awake?!"

Ayu's question was met with a pout from Yukari.

"It's not 'Sensei,' right?"

Upon hearing that, Ayu's face began to heat up.

"…Y-Yukari-san," Ayu forced the words out of her throat, and Yukari nodded happily.

"That's right, Ayu."

They had simply changed what they called each other. And yet, it showed that their relationship had changed fundamentally and that this situation wasn't just a dream. Yukari and Ayu interlocked their fingers and held hands.

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—Phew. It seems like I just barely managed to maintain my dignity as the older one…

As she and Ayu held hands, Yukari sighed to herself. Last night when they shared a bed, she was completely helpless and remained under Ayu's submission, so she at least wanted to maintain her position as the adult when it came to life outside of that. It was her gamer mindset that forced her to go this far, of course. But she at least wanted to seem more mature in front of Ayu. It was a surprise to her that she would go this far despite her dislike for

pretending to be someone she wasn’t. Though she knew that she had already lost all credibility when it came to pretending to be mature, considering she had left all of her work to go on this trip only for her editor to find out, so she was now reluctantly on her way home.

They were currently on their way home from Toyama, but Yukari had managed to get together with Ayu, and she would have wished to check out the sights in Toyama some more first. However, since her editor Shirakawa Miyako had figured out their exact location, ignoring her calls and demands to head home might end up with her coming to drag them back, so they were opting to head back ahead of time.

—I bet she's going to stay at my place all night until the manuscript is done. It's Mya-san we're talking about, after all.

Yukari was assaulted by a melancholic resignation of knowing that she would get a harsh lecture and strict supervision from her editor the second she got home.

—Oh, right.

Yukari remembered that there was something she should be discussing with Ayu before her battle with Miyako.

"Hey, Ayu? Should we tell Mya-san about the two of us?" Yukari asked, putting more strength into her grip on Ayu's hand.

Ayu chewed on the question for a moment.

"…What do you think, Yukari-san?" She asked with an anxious voice.

"Well, since she's technically your guardian here, so I think it would be only fair for her to know."

"That's true, I guess."

Even though Ayu voiced agreement, her expression remained grim.

"Are you scared?" asked Yukari, and Ayu silently nodded.

The previous night, Ayu had told Yukari a bit about the reason why she came to Tokyo. It was because, as a lesbian, her classmates and even her parents treated her with disdain. And Miyako didn't currently know about any of that. Yukari already had a feeling judging from how Ayu acted during her

confession, but coming out as lesbian must be something incredibly terrifying for her.

“I can confidently say that Mya-san wouldn’t ever push you away just because of your sexuality. No matter what. After all, she currently lives with a same-sex couple.”

“Is that so?” Ayu looked surprised.

“Yeah. I heard that she originally lived with an author and a mangaka in the same apartment, but that author got married and then left to live with her husband, and the mangaka got a girlfriend too, who then moved in… or something like that?”

“Th-That sounds pretty complicated… and pretty awkward for Miya-chan…” Ayu commented, sounding slightly awestruck.

“Well, Mya-san’s friends and acquaintances all seem to be rather… special. As for that author who previously lived with her, she—” Yukari was about to say something but stopped herself. “Anyway, Mya-san’s crazy stories aside, she would never push you away. If she’d known about what happened, she would have helped you.”

“I’m sure Miya-chan is different from my parents or my friends back home, but I’m still scared.” Ayu said.

“I see. Then let’s keep it a secret from her for the time being.”

“Huh? Are you fine with that?” Ayu asked, seeming surprised.

Yukari flashed a mischievous smile.

“Yeah. In fact, that would be more convenient for me.”

“Why is that?”

“Even if she knew that we were dating, she wouldn’t blame you in any way… That said, she’d definitely give me hell. ‘How dare you deflower her precious cousin I put in your care?’ And stuff like that.”

“D-Deflower…” Ayu blushed reflexively.

In reality, however, it was Yukari who had her virginity taken by Ayu. Upon remembering that, Yukari’s face turned red, too. The two of them looked at each other, yet felt embarrassed and averted their gazes. This repeated several times. And this awkward atmosphere remained the whole time they rode in the bullet train.

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They got on the regular train at the Tokyo train station and then headed back to the high-class flat located in the center of town where Yukari’s apartment was.

“Aww man, back to reality.”

“Reality…?”

Yukari flopped down on the sofa in the living room with a heavy sigh.

“Honestly, I’m happy we’re back,” Ayu responded with a wry smile.

“Well, yeah. When you come back from a trip, the realization of being home is definitely relaxing. But when I think about my work creeping up on me, I feel like running away again.”

“I swear… Just go on a trip when you’re finished with your work, yeah?”

“Aww Ayu, you’re such a bully!” Yukari pouted.

“I’m not a bully. I’m supposed to be your supervisor, remember?”

“But you’re my girlfriend before that, remember?”

“Huh? Ah, well, I… guess…?”

“You guessed right. So you don’t have to worry about your work anymore.”

“But I can’t just ditch my job. I would feel bad for Miyako-chan.”

Seeing that Ayu was already torn between the two, Yukari continued pressing her by looking directly into her eyes.

“Ayu. What’s more important? Work or me?”

“Th-That question is not fair, and you know it!”

“Then who’s more important? Mya-san or me?”

“Th-That would be you, but… But…!” Ayu began tearing up, but Yukari just smiled at her.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m gonna do my job properly, so don’t worry.”

“Really now?”

“Yup. Totally.”

“Why is your voice so monotone, then?”

“It’s the truth. You should believe whatever an author tells you.”

“Aren’t authors pros at telling lies?!” Ayu retorted, and Yukari let out a sigh.

“Oh, fine then. Just this once, I’ll honor your wish and do my job properly this time.”

“Maybe do that *without* me being on your case all the time?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yukari gave a listless response and stood up to head over to her office.

However, she turned around right before entering.

“Oh yeah, Ayu? So far, you’ve just been a live-in employee of sorts, but now you’ve ranked up to living with your girlfriend, huh?”

“L-Living with…?!”

Those sweet and enticing words made Ayu’s whole body burn up. Yukari also blushed with reddened cheeks.

“Anyway, please take care of me, Ayu.”

“Y-Yes, likewise… Yukari-san.”

Hearing Yukari call her name, and calling her by her first name, made Ayu feel like she was filled with fluffy happiness.

—*So going out with someone can bring you this much happiness?*

*

Late night, specifically 10pm, rolled around, and Yukari realized she wouldn't be able to finish the manuscript that evening, so she decided to give up and head to bed. But right after she decided that, her apartment's doorbell rang. She waited a moment.

"Yukari-san, Miya-chan is here," Ayu said as she opened the door to the office.

"Can't you just lie and send her away?"

"Huh?! That won't do, I already opened the lock on the ground floor."

"Noooo…"

Immediately after, the intercom rang again, so Yukari resigned herself and opened the front door. As expected, she was greeted by her editor glaring at her—Shirakawa Miyako, 27 years old. She was the perfect example of a city beauty who also excelled at her work, but also possessed a level of cuteness that Yukari was used to from her cousin Ayu. However, betraying that cuteness were the large bags under Miyako's eyes.

"Um… hello there, Mya-san! You seem… tired, yes," Yukari chose her words carefully.

"Yes. Absolutely. All because you continue to give me more work while I'm already swamped, Hikari," said Miyako in a cold tone.

Miyako was tasked with looking after more authors than just Yukari—pen name Kairou Hikari—and most of them were even more popular than Yukari herself. Many of them had other works going on like manga, anime, and movie adaptations of their novels, too. Yukari didn't know her exact

schedule, but there's no doubt she suffered through a lot on a day-to-day basis.

"If you're that busy, then you can just put me on the back burner, you know?" Yukari said in complete seriousness, but Miyako just glared at her.

"There's no way I would do that. I'm your editor, remember?"

"But there are priorities you have to set, right?"

"Sorry, but I'm not talented enough to do that."

"I figured…"

Shirakawa Miyako didn't put an order or rank to the authors she was responsible for, and attempted to give each of them the same amount of attention. That was why she had earned herself the respect of so many peculiar authors in the scene. Miyako headed inside and right to the living room.

"Oh yeah, this is a souvenir from Toyama for you, Mya-san," Yukari said and offered her a stick with a glass shrimp and steamed seasoned fish paste.

"I'll gladly take it, but the way you're handing me a souvenir without showing the slightest glimmer of remorse sure pisses me off." Miyako grumbled and accepted it. "Can I eat it right away?"

"Of course, of course. Are you hungry?"

"I haven't had dinner yet. Actually, I don't think I had anything for lunch, either."

"That's not very healthy, you know?"

Even Yukari seemed like she was worried now. Ayu joined in the conversation.

"Miya-chan, should I cook something for you?"

"Are you sure? If you don't mind," Miyako answered.

"Oh, I'd also like a snack if possible!"

“Okay.”

Ayu nodded and headed over to the kitchen. After around ten minutes, Ayu carried out some grilled meat with noodles and a rolled omelet. Miyako’s noodles came in a bowl with thick noodles, but Yukari only got a small soup bowl with a minimum amount of meat.

“Delicious… You’re such a great cook, Acchan.”

Having gotten a taste of the food, Miyako’s expression melted away. After receiving this praise, Ayu felt flustered.

“It’s just regular noodles, and the fried food is a seafood mix we had frozen, so it’s not anything crazy.”

“What are you talking about? It’s not normal to just whip up something like this out of nowhere. I’d honestly die to have you as my wife.”

“Wueh?!”

Miyako’s joke made Ayu blush even more.

“No can do, Mya-san! Ayu already belongs to me.”

Yukari intended to say this as a joke, but she ended up sounding far more serious than she intended, so she panicked a bit. Luckily, Miyako didn’t seem to notice at all.

“I was just joking anyway. That said, I appreciate you looking after Hikari, but be sure to do your part as her supervisor. If she’s slacking off with her work, you can break her bones or chain her to her desk. And if you can’t keep her down, at least let me know. Definitely don’t go on runaway trips like that.”

“I… I’m sorry…” Ayu said, dejected.

“Now, now, Mya-san! Ayu didn’t mean to cause any trouble, you know?” Yukari poured some sake she had bought in Toyama into a small sake cup.

“Y-You are just…” Miyako’s face stiffened as she looked at Yukari and the sake cup.

Needless to say, the current lineup of food would pair perfectly with Japanese sake. The salty taste of the stick she had received as a souvenir and the glass shrimp created a beautiful accent to the dish, and it made you want to have some alcohol along with it. Miyako hesitated for a moment, but eventually reached for the cup and gulped it down in one go.

“Fwaaaah! The absolute bliss!”

—*Heh, I’ve got you now.*

As Miyako sighed in joy and happiness, Yukari grinned to herself. Since she was running low on sleep, as well as an empty stomach, alcohol should be immediately effective. And once Miyako goes out cold from being drunk, Yukari would get away without an hour-long lecture and instead get some well-needed sleep.

“Now, now, Mya-san, have some more. Ayu, would you mind bringing soy pickled squid and the salt and spicy glass shrimp?”

“O-Okay!”

Yukari had Ayu bring over the other souvenirs they had bought, and she made Miyako drink more and more. Miyako slowly lost all hesitation and drank as much as she was given. Judging from this pace, she’d be out cold in no time at all… However, even after four whole bottles, Miyako remained strong. Not only that, she didn’t show any signs of even getting drunk. Rather, she might be tipsy at most.

—*Seriously?*

Yukari knew that Miyako could hold her liquor, but this was beyond anything she could have anticipated. Once she realized that the bottle was empty, Miyako let out a satisfied sigh and then looked at Yukari’s face.

“Thanks for the treat. Now that that’s out of the way… let’s talk work, shall we?”

“Waaah…”

Apparently, finishing four bottles of sake was a “treat” for Miyako. Yukari suddenly felt terrified just looking at her.

“How’s your progress with the manuscript? The deadline is upon us, remember?”

“Not good.”

Since Miyako didn’t waste any time getting right into it, Yukari confessed in a single breath.

“Percentage-wise?”

“60… No, maybe 63%.”

In reality, it was more like 43%, but Miyako didn’t need to know that.

“Hm… So you’re about as late as usual. Honestly, it’s pretty scary that I’ve come to accept that fact. Anyway, I’ll be waiting here until you’re done, then.”

“No, you don’t have to. I know you’re tired, so please go home yourself and get some sleep!”

“I don’t have the time for that. The moment you’re done with the manuscript, I’m diving right into editing.”

“Oh, please… I bet you’ve given yourself a few days of buffer, right? I know you all too well, girl.”

Usually, one would prepare a few extra days in case the deadline was a bit too tight and the manuscript wasn’t done in time so that the release still wouldn’t have to be delayed. However…

“Serialized works don’t have any buffer, you dummy,” said Miyako.

“I see…”

Right now, Yukari was working on a series serialized in an online magazine every two weeks, which had an entirely different schedule than regular book releases.

“Also, I usually tell authors the actual final deadline for books. Lately there’s been a lot of idio—certain authors who have tried to calculate the final deadline from the day the book is supposed to be released, so if I give them too much leeway for the deadline, they’ll break it anyway with no remorse… like a certain Kaiou Hikari.”

“I’m definitely not treating my deadline carelessly. In fact, I always feel pain and regret when I don’t make it in time for the deadline,” Yukari said with a serious tone, but Miyako met her with a stern gaze.

“Then why does this same thing happen over and over? Are you numb to pain or something?”

“About that… Well don’t you know that even shrimp and other crustacean animals have a sense of pain? There have been recent studies about that. When I found that out, I suddenly started struggling to eat sweet shrimp like I had before… Well, it’s still delicious, so I’m not completely avoiding eating it.”

“And why does that matter right now? If you have time to give me lessons on miscellaneous knowledge, then work on the dang manuscript!”

“Waaah! But I just came back from Toyama after working all the time, so I’m honestly a bit tired…”

“It’s your fault for running off on a trip right before the deadline. You could have just finished your work and then taken it easy on your trip, you know?”

“Oh please, what are you saying? It’s the deadline’s fault that I want to skip out on work and go on trips and play video games and eat food all day to relax.”

“You’re so lost. A failure of a functioning human. Incorrigible human trash…” Miyako glared at Yukari, who suddenly felt shivers running all over her body.

“Well, okay… I guess I’ll go back to work.”

Since teasing Miyako like that had ended up being a good change of pace, Yukari decided to return to her manuscript.

“But before that, I’ll go to the bathroom,” Yukari headed off to the bathroom before returning to her office.

For some reason, Ayu followed her.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Ayu?” Yukari asked.

“Could you… finish your manuscript quickly?”

“Oh geez. Now even you’re saying the same things as her?” Yukari pouted.

“Because… I want to be alone with you, Yukari-san.” Ayu blushed.

Maybe she had gotten jealous after seeing how close Miyako and Yukari were. Either way, these words made Yukari's whole head boil. A surprise attack was not fair. It was far too cute. Yukari covered her face with her hands and turned her back to Ayu, mumbling "I…I'll do my best" in a quivering voice.

Chapter 2: Taking A Bath Together Progresses Right Before the Deadline

This might be a bit abrupt, but Ebiwara Yukari's bath was quite large. There were times when she would take a shower to fight the sleepiness when she was battling her manuscript, but it was much more likely for her to lock herself in the bath for one hour at least, sometimes even three hours. Ayu knew that some people loved to take long baths, so she didn't really pay it much mind, but when they were on their trip to Toyama, she finished taking a bath and also a sauna trip after a mere 30 minutes. If you really loved baths, you would definitely use the hot spring bath as long as possible, so Ayu became somewhat suspicious and asked Yukari about it directly.

"Yukari-san, what are you usually doing in the bath?"

"What do you mean?" Yukari responded with a dubious look.

"I mean, your baths are always so long."

"Oh…" Yukari nodded with a convinced expression and smiled. "Are you curious about how I take my baths?"

"Yes, actually."

Ayu's blunt response left Yukari flustered.

"I… I see…" She said with a red face but tried to regain her composure. "Usually, I just watch videos."

"Videos? On YouChube or such?"

"Nope. Subscription-based anime, dramas, or movies."

"Subscription…"

That sounded familiar, even to country girl Ayu.

"You can do that on your smartphone?"

“No, I use a waterproof tablet.”

“I see. But won’t you get dizzy if your baths last too long?” Ayu asked with a look of concern.

“I make sure I have enough water intake. I grab myself a whole cooler and fill it with a drink or non-alcoholic cocktails to then enjoy while I take my bath.”

“That’s at least something, but… Why do you watch movies in the bath? You have such a huge TV.” Ayu glanced over at the 65-inch TV in the living room.

Wouldn’t a bigger screen give you an even better experience if you wanted to watch movies or the like?

“It’s a completely different feeling when watching while taking a bath. A regular TV or PC can’t do that at all.”

“What’s the difference, then?”

“Mhm…” Yukari hesitated for a brief moment as she thought about it. “Wanna try it out?”

“Try it out? Watch videos while taking a bath?”

“Yeah… With me, that is.”

Yukari’s words made Ayu blush. The only time they had taken a bath together was in the morning after they started going out—back at the inn. And back then, there were other people present. Taking a bath in a public bath like that and enjoying one in the privacy of your own home was completely different. In a lewd—or rather, intimate—sense.

“Th-Then… I think I’d like to try it out. Watching videos… while taking a bath.”

Ayu agreed, all the while using the video experience as an excuse to pretend that she had no ulterior motive.

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After they finished eating dinner, Ayu worked on doing the dishes while Yukari began cleaning the bath. Usually, this was also Ayu's job, but Yukari decided she might as well. She cleaned it with strength and tenacity like she was trying to waste time right before an approaching deadline and then filled it with hot water. While that was happening, she grabbed non-alcoholic cocktails and bottles of sports drinks and packed them into the cooler she had used for her fishing trip the other day, along with some ice cream and ice packs, and left them in the bathroom. Finally, she grabbed the fully-charged 11-inch tablet from her office and headed to the bath with Ayu.

"All right, let's head in," Yukari said and took off her clothes without any hesitation.

Ayu's face turned red from the sight, but she tried to hide it by taking off her own clothes. Even as Yukari looked at Ayu's body, admiring how cute she was or how big her breasts were despite her small stature, she didn't particularly feel sexually aroused. In the end, the feelings Ayu had for her, and the feelings she had for Ayu might be different on a fundamental level. Yukari then finished a brief shower and sat inside the bathtub, calling out to Ayu who was awkwardly standing at the door.

"Come on, Ayu."

Ayu nodded, while blushing, and attempted to sit in the bathtub facing Yukari.

"If we're facing each other, we can't watch the videos together, right?" Yukari said as Ayu's gaze wandered around the room.

"Huh? But then how do we…?"

Granted, the bathtub was large enough to fit the two of them. However, sitting next to each other would definitely be too much. Yukari opened her legs and pointed in front of her.

"Right here."

“Th-There?”

Ayu still seemed hesitant, but eventually…

“D-Don’t mind if I do, then…” She slowly entered the bathtub with her back facing Yukari.

Ayu’s small back pressed against Yukari’s chest, making it so that her own temperature was slowly rising.

“So what should we watch?”

Yukari wrapped her arms around Ayu and showed her the subscription-based app, pretending to be calm.

“A-Anything is fine.”

“Really?”

Yukari worked on the app and just chose a random movie she hadn’t watched yet. Immediately after, the movie started playing.

“Ayu, could you put the tablet on there?” Yukari pointed at a magnetic tablet holder stuck to the wall of the bath.

“Ah, so that’s what that was for,” Ayu said, mentally connecting the dots, then did as he was told.

*

The movie turned out to be an American horror movie about monsters attacking people. The setting was a southern resort, and it told the story of a group of partying people who entered a forbidden cave and accidentally freed a monster that was sealed there. Although they were a solid meter away from the screen, they could watch the movie with no issues. They even changed it to a Japanese dub. Granted, the tablet’s speakers weren’t the best, but it was a different feeling from watching it in a big room like the living room. Since Ayu had rarely ever watched movies herself, she didn’t even know if horror was her genre or not, but she quite enjoyed watching blood, gore, and

splatter. Back home, she'd often watch death metal music videos with lots of blood and gore when her family or friends weren't around.

As a result, she figured she shouldn't have any problem enjoying this movie. She wanted to focus on it and simply be entertained. She tried her best to only pay attention to the movie. She tried to tell herself to do exactly that, but she had no idea what was even happening in the movie. The blood splattering everywhere left her emotionless, and the screams of the people who were getting attacked went in one ear and out the other. The soft sensation of Yukari's chest pressed against her back created a tornado of the color pink in her head. Not only that, but Yukari's arms wrapped around her were like an external pump that made her heart race faster.

—*No way! No way no way no way! This is too much!*

In this state, there was no way she could focus on the movie. It was a fairly long movie, so there was still one hour left, but Ayu had already reached her limit. She was feeling dizzy a lot quicker than she usually would. She needed some water to freshen up her mind, so she attempted to turn around to face Yukari, but her grip on Ayu strengthened. On the tablet screen was a scene of the blonde-haired party girl, the one who had freed the monster, getting chased by it. Even now, the distance between them continued to shrink, and the girl was running for her life. At the same time, Yukari's grip on Ayu grew even fiercer, and she pressed her chest against Ayu's back.

"Yukari-san?"

"Wh-What is it?"

Ayu was slightly bewildered when she called the girl's name, only for Yukari to respond with a rather high-pitched voice.

"Are you… scared right now?" Ayu glanced over her shoulder and asked.

In response, Yukari gave a bashful nod.

"O-Of course I am… It's a horror movie after—Eeek…!"

Right as she uttered those words, the monster reached the girl and killed her on the spot, blood splattering everywhere. The monster then proceeded to devour the dead girl's corpse while roaring.

"Eeep…!" Yukari narrowed her eyes and let out a terrified meep.

"Are you bad with horror stuff, Yukari-san?"

"W-Well, I definitely am not good with it… Eeek!"

The monster glared at the screen, which made Yukari's body quiver.

"Why did you select a horror movie then?"

"The best part of enjoying horror is when you're scared lifeless. Well, I don't think I'll be able to sleep with the lights off for a while…" Yukari said and continued. "Also, you're not scared at all, Ayu?"

"Not really…"

"That's a surprise… You were so terrified when we went up on the Sky Tree and stood on the glass floor."

Ayu began blushing as she remembered that.

"That can't even be compared to a horror movie! If that glass breaks, we're dead! A horror movie is just a fake scenario."

"But the glass won't break, so it's fine!" Yukari flashed a wry smile, but when she glanced back at the scene in the movie, that expression turned into one of shock.

She would regularly let out screams or silently go "Eeek!" as the movie went on. Sometimes, she would tighten her grip on Ayu, sometimes she'd tried to hide behind her. Watching her like that… made Ayu start feeling incredibly horny. Even more so since they were naked right now. Yukari's cute reactions completely obliterated her ability to maintain her composure. On the screen, the monster continued to devour humans who were still alive, as—

—*She looks delicious.*

Ayu began to sympathize with the monster in the movie.

“Yukari-san…”

Ayu leaned forward, away from Yukari.

“Ayu…?” Yukari gave her a dubious look.

Ayu then turned around and looked at every part of her beautiful body.

“A-Ayu?”

“Raaaawr,” Ayu copied the sound of the monster roaring with a monotone voice, which made Yukari falter a bit.

She slowly crept her way toward Yukari. Behind her on the screen, she could hear another scream. The monster was most likely enjoying a feast right about now.

“…I’m going to dig in too, okay?”

“Huh? Are you hungry? Want some ice cream?” Yukari pointed at the cooler, a cold sweat appeared on her brow.

Ayu kept on looking at Yukari.

“Before that… I’m going to have a taste of you, Yukari-san,” she said calmly, running her tongue along Yukari’s neck.

“~~~!” Yukari let out an indecipherable shriek. “A-Ayu, calm down!”

But Ayu’s response remained the same—

“Raaaawr.”

“No… Not even words are working…?!”

Yukari let out a playful scream and just gave in to the happiness, not fighting back anymore.

*

As a result, the beauty who carelessly opened the monster’s seal was eaten whole. **THE END**

Chapter 3: The Habit of Eating Cat Food Progresses Before the Deadline

Yukari and Ayu lived in a four-room apartment, and one of the rooms was a storage room that totaled 13 square meters in size, where Yukari stored her books or anything related to her work. Yukari said Ayu was free to use the center of that room as she pleased, but up to this point, Ayu had always hesitated to take her up on that offer. That said, now they were dating—and living together. In other words, part of this room now belonged to her… Well, saying that might be a bit arrogant of a thing to do, but at least looking through the storage room should be fine.

Some things Yukari still used to this day, but others were left here to practically rot away. So, as her girlfriend, Ayu was curious about just what sort of things Yukari was into. For that reason, Ayu checked the various bookshelves around the room, entering the walk-in closet she had stayed away from all this time. The inside of this closet was in even more disarray than the actual room, filled with boxes of clothes, figurines, and plastic models, as well as some odd-looking machines (probably an outdated console) and such.

As the methodical person that Ayu was, she was already battling the urge to clean up the room. While she was restraining herself, she spotted a single cardboard box in the corner of the closet. Nothing was written on it that could tell her what she would find inside. Curiosity got the better of her, and when she opened it, she found plastic plates with a cat paw logo on them, as well as around ten cans of food. There were several different designs, but each of them either had a picture or a drawing of a cat on it. It must be canned cat food.

“Yukari-san, have you ever had a cat?” Ayu left the room and asked Yukari, who was sitting in the living room.

“A cat? Why?” Yukari made a dubious face.

“I found cat food and plates for feeding them in a cardboard box.”

“Ah, that.” Yukari seemed to remember now. “Those are leftovers from a time I looked after a friend’s cat. I guess I just left the cardboard box there.”

“Oh, I see.”

“See, this girl here,” Yukari said and showed Ayu her phone screen.

On the screen was a cat sitting on an automatic cleaning robot.

“Gosh, she’s so cute!” Ayu’s eyes opened wide.

“Right? Her name’s Sarubobo-chan,” Yukari smiled and showed Ayu more pictures and videos.

Sometimes Yukari was even in the video or picture, sometimes the cat was with Miyako. Not only that, but there was such a massive number of pictures that you couldn’t possibly get through them all in one go.

“That’s so many. How long did you keep her?”

“I think about two months or so?”

“Two months?”

That was about the same amount of time as Ayu had spent with Yukari so far.

“Yeah. My friend apparently went on this big all-country tour, so she was barely home.”

“What’s an all-country tour?”

That term sounded unfamiliar to Ayu, and she tilted her head in confusion.

“Touring Japan, China, and Taiwan…I think. She’s actually the voice actress and artist who voiced one of the characters in the anime adaptation of one of my novels.”

“The voice actress and artist… You mean Mizuki Nana?!”

Ayu dropped the name of the one voice actress and singer she knew, but Yukari shook her head.

“No, no,” she smiled. “Suhara Tomoka.”

“Suhara… Tomoka…”

Ayu looked her up on her phone and quickly found her Wikipedia page. The sheer amount of text was significantly more than Kairou Hikari’s page she had seen a while back, and just reading it would probably take a lot of time.

“I bet she’s amazing…”

Suhara Tomoka—When she was five, she was already working as a child actor in TV dramas or movies. At ten years old, she set foot into the voice acting world and has been hitting it off ever since. She’s also a popular singer. A child actor, voice actress, singer, Oricon top 10 achievement, an all-country tour… So many unfamiliar words washed over Ayu that she could barely even keep up. Not only that, Suhara Tomoka is still only 18 years old right now. That’s just a one-year difference from Ayu. She knew that there were countless people in this world far more talented than Ayu despite being the same age, but most of them felt like they had come from a different world.

However, this person came from the same country as Ayu, and she was close enough to Ayu’s world that Yukari had even looked after her pet. Because of her lousy lifestyle, it was easy to forget that Ebirou Hikari actually belonged to that group of people. Unlike Ayu, who had nothing going on. But of course, Yukari had no idea about these feelings.

“How many cans of pet food do we have left?” Yukari suddenly asked out of nowhere.

“At least ten, I think.”

“I see… Then I guess we might as well get rid of the leftover cans.”

“Are you going to throw them away?”

Yukari slowly shook her head and spoke with a serious tone.

“We might as well eat them.”

“You’re going to eat them?!”

“Yup. Since Sarupopo-chan always made it look so incredibly delicious, I was wondering what it tasted like. But I didn’t want to sink so low and eat it by myself because I feel like it would make me a failure of an adult.”

“…And eating it with someone else would make it perfectly acceptable?”

“Because then we can play it off as a weird joke and never talk about it again, right?”

“Can we?”

“If things get incredibly awkward, we can just laugh about it. And knowing you, I bet you could even make cat food as delicious as a 3-star chef could.”

“I don’t think you should blindly trust me like that!” Ayu rejected these ridiculous expectations, but a part of her still felt happy to think they might be able to experience something only between themselves.

“Then let’s have a taste, first. Even if I’m going to cook it, I have to know what it tastes like.”

“Are you sure?!” Yukari exclaimed with joy, and Ayu quickly responded by saying ‘It would be a waste to throw it away, after all.’

*

And so, it was decided that the two inhabitants of the Ebiwara Estate would eat cat food. They brought out 14 cans of cat food and placed them on the dining room table. All of them were from different brands because Yukari didn’t want the cat to get tired of one band too quickly.

“All right, then let’s get the tasting started.” Yukari chose a random can, opened the lid, and pushed it onto Ayu. “Here you go.”

Ayu faltered.

“I have to try it first?! No, you can have the first taste…”

“You have to be the one cooking, so you should…”

“You said you wanted to try it, so you can go first.”

“Mhm…”

In the end, Ayu was the one who had the most sound argument, so Yukari reached for the cat food with her chopsticks. Granted, she was the one who had suggested it, but she still had some sort of hesitance toward eating cat food. However, it didn’t look much different from canned tuna. If not for the picture of a cat on the cover, people probably wouldn’t even notice. This one seemed to be a mix of salmon and skipjack tuna. Both of them were fish that Yukari really liked. Eventually, the hesitation she felt seemed to weaken, and she grabbed some food and placed it into her mouth. Ayu stared at this process with open eyes.

“H-How is it…?”

“…It doesn’t really taste like anything,” Yukari made a complicated expression and just tilted her head like she was thinking about it.

It had no real salty or juicy, delicious or nasty flavor, it just… existed. She had no way of telling if this was supposed to be salmon or tuna. Only after swallowing it did she realize that this was supposed to be fish. She knew that most canned tuna is too salty for cats, but she was still surprised that they had watered it down this much.

“I-I guess I’ll have a taste, too,” Ayu slowly reached for the food with her chopsticks, carrying a bit to her mouth.

“It tastes like nothing…”

“Right?”

Ayu made a dissatisfied expression which made Yukari answer with a wry smile.

“Let’s try out another one,” Yukari said and opened another can.

This one was supposedly based on sliced chicken.

“How about this one…?” She carefully carried it to her mouth. “Still no taste.”

All the taste of the tender low-calorie chicken was completely gone, and the majority of the taste was just water. Ayu joined in and took a bite, but her face simply stiffened.

“N-Next…!”

The third can Yukari opened was beef.

“I think Sarupopo-chan liked this one the most.”

“Oh…It looks like corned beef…”

“Yeah, it might actually be good this time,” Yukari nodded. “How about we eat it at the same time?”

“Okay.”

Both of them grabbed a bite and then chanted a one-two to carry it into their mouths at the same time.

“Mhm…”

“Urk…”

The meat was plain with no taste of saltiness, but it had a faint taste of lukewarm oil that created an awful harmony on their tongues.

“That tastes awful.”

“It’s so nasty…”

Yukari and Ayu gave their genuine impressions at the same time. The previous two attempts simply had next to no taste, but this was something completely in a different league. Despite it looking fairly delicious, the taste was horrid.

“…I wonder if Sarupopo-chan actually liked this…”

“Maybe it was just acting?”

Yukari grew genuinely worried, and Ayu commented in a serious tone.

“It… It’s too early to judge with just these. Let’s try out the others.”

“Whaaat…?”

While Yukari bet on the off-chance and opened more cans, Ayu couldn’t hide her disdain. Ultimately, most of the cans all had some small differences in taste, but most were far too weak for a human to enjoy. That said, the ingredients were all edible for people, too, so with a bit of sauce and seasoning, you could mix it in with other food to make a regular dish. Cat food pasta, cat food soup, cat food oyakodon, cat food minced meat bowl, cat food okonomiyaki, cat food hamburger steak, and so on, so forth. It took the two of them around three days to work through all the cans, which helped them realize the importance of oil and salt, and they swore to never eat cat food ever again.

This whole incident remained a funny memory and a bit of a failure considering the circumstances—or so it should have been.

Chapter 4: The Idol Voice Actresses' Visit Progresses Right Before the Deadline

The day after Ayu and Yukari finished eating all the cat food, Ayu finished doing the dishes and the laundry and sat in her room to watch some videos. She started with a music video, but not rock or metal like what she'd usually listen to. Instead, she watched an anime song done by a voice actress. Prior to this, she had never really been into anime or idols and the like, so this was new land for her. After listening to it for a while, though, she did come to like it. She was listening to Suhara Tomoka.

It was the same person who had placed her cat in Yukari's care. She was 18 years old and had a youthful face—of course, Ayu wasn't one to talk—but her small face and long limbs had grown where it mattered, emphasizing her good physique. She was wearing frilly clothes and dancing with a smile. Her distinctive, nasal voice made her look even cuter and simply charming. Of course, not in a sexual way. On this particular video website, they uploaded the music video and footage of a live concert, where she danced in front of thousands of people like it was the most natural thing ever.

…She sure is amazing.

A mix of admiration and respect, as well as a faint sense of insecurity and inferiority, filled Ayu when the video ended and the next one began to play. This one was from an interview. It seemed to be an advertisement for the anime she was going to be acting in. She wasn't the only one getting interviewed; there were other voice actresses with her. The title of the show was 'I Was Reincarnated As The Strongest Loser Hottie Protagonist.' It didn't take Ayu long to realize that this was Yukari's work. She had only ever touched the live adaptation of Yukari's debut novel. That said, there was supposedly a Blu-ray of the anime in the storage room, so Ayu figured she

should watch it sometime. The questions in the interview were generally about the characters they were acting as or the general plot of the work.

‘In the novel, Leanbell (Tomoka’s character; A Princess) and Iselina (Another character: A female knight) are practically like sisters, but what are you two like in your private lives?’

In response to that question…

‘Needless to say, we’re just as close as they are!’ said Tomoka with a smile.

‘After our recording sessions are done, we usually eat together. And on our off days, we regularly hang out, too,’ said the other VA.

‘We even went shopping a while back!’ added Tomoka as she clung to the other woman’s arm.

Their heads moved closer, and they gave off a vibe that was a bit different from just being friends. Ayu grew flustered as she watched the video, wondering if those two might be a thing. But then…

“Ayu, do you have a moment?”

Yukari knocked on the door, calling her name.

“Y-Yes! Come in!” Ayu put her phone away and answered.

“…Ayu, is your face red or something?”

Yukari’s question forced Ayu to maintain her composure and say “Isn’t that just your imagination?”

“…Were you browsing porn or something?”

“Not at all.”

“Reaaally?”

“Really! If I was watching porn, I’d be so horny right now I would assault you the second I saw you!”

Since Yukari wouldn’t let up, Ayu lashed out on her.

“R-Right now might be a bit…” Yukari blushed and averted her gaze.

That reaction made Ayu feel flustered, too.

“What is it?”

“Ah, right. We’re having a guest come over tonight, so could you maybe cook for three people and make it a bit more than usual?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

Ayu wanted to cook a whole lot anyway since they had finally finished all the cat food and had plenty of extra food stored over.

“So who’s that visitor? Miya-chan?”

“Nope,” Yukari shook her head. “It’s the voice actress Suhara Tomoka. The owner of Sarubobo-chan. Remember her?”

Hearing that name, Ayu couldn’t control her shock. She screamed “Huuuh?!” out loud.

*

The first time Yukari and Suhara Tomoka talked was after the recording of the first episode of ‘I Was Reincarnated As The Strongest Loser Hottie Protagonist.’ Usually, Yukari wouldn’t get too involved with the media mix and adaptations of her works, just leaving the cast and everything to the staff. As for the actual recording, she joined one session because she figured it might be a good reference if she ever needed it. For the first episode, she simply greeted the director, producer, and the cast with a brief ‘I hope it turns into a great anime’ and left it there. After that recording, Yukari prepared to head home. As she left the studio, a cute girl approached her. Since she wasn’t carrying anything with her, she was probably waiting for Yukari. This person was Suhara Tomoka.

Yukari usually only cared about the anime or games themselves and not the actual staff or people working on them, but even she knew how popular Tomoka was. That said, since she couldn’t see any benefit for Tomoka to

come to greet the author of one of the many anime she was voicing a character in, she just assumed Tomoka was being polite. That said, instead of just sharing a brief greeting, the girl started telling Yukari about her impressions of the novel she had just released a while ago. Yukari felt happy to hear she enjoyed it, so she thanked Tomoka, though she was a bit bewildered.

“Actually, I read all your works from ‘Search for the Heart’ and everything after that.”

When Yukari heard that, she was more cautious than happy. Her family had often warned her of people who try to gain something by showing off how much they know about you. More than that, Yukari wasn’t the type who liked having family or friends read her novels, so this kind of appeal wasn’t all too effective. That said, a popular voice actress trying to suck up to an author probably didn’t happen too often, so Yukari might have jumped the gun by assuming she only read all her books for that.

After that, they ended up having dinner together and went to a membership-only restaurant near the studio. After a bit of talking, Yukari realized that the girl was actually a serious otaku, and her novels matched up with her tastes. In fact, they both had a shared interest in a novelist named Kaijina Yuta, who had announced a break from her work because of her pregnancy, saying stuff like ‘I want her to come back quickly’ or ‘I can’t forgive that manwhore who got to marry her.’

Originally, Yukari only intended to be present for the recording of the first episode, but since Tomoka immediately asked about her plans for the future, she ended up participating in all 12 episodes, always eating dinner with Tomoka afterwards. Once the recording for all the episodes was done, Tomoka ended up being incredibly busy with her other work, so they only ended up chatting on LINE for the most part, but roughly half a year ago, Tomoka asked her to take care of her cat Sarubobo. Apparently, she had

remembered Yukari telling her that she always wanted to keep a cat but couldn’t deal with the responsibility.

After Tomoka finished her tour and took Sarubobo back, they once again didn’t see each other for a while, but at least for today, Tomoka’s plans for a recording suddenly fell flat and she had some extra time, which is why she asked Yukari out to dinner. Yukari herself felt like meeting her, too, and she considered inviting her to a sushi restaurant she got a ticket for from her brother on her birthday… but then Ayu’s face came to mind.

‘OK. Then do you want to come over to my place?’

Yukari nonchalantly sent that line message, and it only took a few seconds for Tomoka to read the message and respond with ‘If you don’t mind, I would gladly stop by.’ And so, Yukari asked Ayu to cook a more extravagant menu while she herself went back to work—or rather, her game.

*

Later that day at 6 pm, Suhara Tomoka came to visit. For every MV, live concert, and other events, she always wore different clothes, hairstyles, and sparkled with various colors, but right now, she just left her semi-long black hair as is, and wore fairly plain clothes. That said…

“It’s been a while, Sensei.”

As she stood at the front entrance, she took off her mask and smiled, which was even more cute than in any videos Ayu had seen.

“Hey there, Tomoka-chan. Come on in,” Yukari said with a friendly tone, so Tomoka nodded and did just that, only to glance over at Ayu.

“Sensei, who is that?”

“She’s basically my live-in employee, Shirakawa Ayu-chan.”

“Live-in…?!” Tomoka’s eyes opened wide for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure. “So she’s like… your assistant?”

“Not really. She mostly handles the chores.”

“I see… So like a helper,” Tomoka then looked over at Ayu, showing a somewhat disrupted smile. “Nice to meet you. My name is Suhara Tomoka, and I’m a voice actress.”

“N-Nice to meet you, um…” Ayu was flustered and returned a greeting, though she was unsure of what she should say her employment was. “I’m Shirakawa Ayu. A pleasure.”

“By the way, how old are you, Shirakawa-san?”

“…I’m 17.”

“Oh, so I’m one year older. Are you still attending school?”

“N-No… Not right now,” Ayu awkwardly responded.

“Ah, I’m sorry for asking something so insensitive…” Tomoka lowered her head and apologized.

“It… It’s fine, really,” Ayu gave a confused answer.

Although they were only a year apart in terms of age, the way she presented herself and talked made her seem much more mature than her age. She probably was used to working amongst adults… and in fact, she at least seemed more of a grown-up than Yukari.

“Come on in, no need to stand around like that.” Yukari said.

The three of them headed over to the dining room.

“I’ll start working on dinner, then,” Ayu said.

“Does she always cook for you?”

“Sometimes I do make it, but for the most part, it’s Ayu’s work,” Yukari answered Tomoka’s question. “Her cooking is on the level of a professional chef, you know. You can look forward to it,” added Yukari, only raising the bar even more for Ayu.

“It… It’s not that amazing!”

“Oh, really?” Tomoka responded with a smile, sounding somewhat disappointed. “What have you been making lately?”

Ayu thought back to the past few days and then glanced over at Yukari. She apparently had been thinking the same thing, and the two of them shared a bitter smile.

“Um… Cat food-based cooking, mostly.”

“Cat food?!” Tomoka exclaimed in a shocked voice.

“Like cat food hamburger steak, pasta, and okonomiyaki…”

Tomoka couldn’t believe what she had just heard.

“Y-You’re feeding Sensei random cat food?! Is this some new kind of bullying?! Abuse?!” Tomoka had already dropped her polite tone to scream, but Yukari jumped in to help.

“Relax, Tomoka-chan. I suggested that we try it out.”

“Huh? Why…?”

When met with this expected question, Yukari just tilted her head in a cute way.

“Because Ayu found leftover cat food for Sarubobo-chan, and throwing it away would have been a waste.”

“Was that… supposed to be referential material for one of your novels?”

“Yup,” Yukari nodded without a glimmer of hesitation, but Ayu just glared at her.

“As I would expect from a master of the craft. Eating cat food for the sake of your novel…”

Yukari flashed a confident smirk after she successfully changed the course of the conversation into praise being flung her way.

“Well if you’re so passionate about your work, should I cook up a cat food dish for you again, Yukari-san? I should still have some left,” said Ayu.

“Please do not,” Yukari frantically shook her head.

“Just kidding.”

Ayu then headed to the kitchen and started bringing out the food to the dining table. For a main dish, she made paella with shrimp, octopus, squid, and shellfish. All of those were fish you shouldn’t feed a cat. Along with that, she made bouillabaisse with mainly seafood ingredients. And to top it off, more food not meant for cats in the form of marinated food with avocado and onion, as well as French onion soup with baked pie wrap.

“Wohooo! Human food time!”

Upon sight of this magnificent meal, Yukari cheered like a small child.

“I’ve never seen someone express their happiness like that…” Tomoka said and looked at all the food in front of her. “Did you make all of this, Shirakawa-san?”

“Ah, yes. You like seafood right, Suhara-san?”

Ayu didn’t want to feed their guest any food they didn’t like, so she looked her up a bit before deciding on what to cook.

“…I love it. Everything looks incredibly delicious. Can I upload a picture of this on Insta?” Tomoka said, yet again sounding rather defeated.

Usually, Ayu sat on the chair that Tomoka was now sitting on, so Ayu instead sat down next to Yukari. Yukari enjoyed some white wine, with Ayu and Tomoka having a glass of ginger ale.

“All right, let’s have a toast,” Yukari said.

“Oh wait. Before that…” Tomoka reached into her bag and took out something to offer it to Yukari. “I ended up being a bit late, but here’s your birthday present.”

Yukari’s birthday actually was on June 25th—roughly two weeks ago.

“Oh, thank you. Do you mind if I open it now?”

“Of course not.”

Yukari opened the wrapping paper, which revealed an expensive-looking box black box. Inside was a single ladle with a wooden handle.

““A ladle…?””

Ayu and Yukari let out bewildered reactions in unison. Tomoka nodded.

“It’s a high-grade ladle that won’t wear out no matter how much you cook with it. It also can handle heat very well, and it won’t lose color even if you use it for curry and the like.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” said Ayu.

She had never had any issues with the cooking utensils or the ladles in Yukari’s home, but one that won’t wear out at all could definitely help her a lot. Yukari gave the ladle a closer look.

“Wow… I never knew that ladles like this even existed. How much did it cost?”

“12,000 yen.”

“Pffft!” Ayu almost spit everywhere.

“12,000 yen?!”

Yukari's eyes shot open as well and then grinned with a 'Not bad, Tomoka-chan…' as she pushed up her imaginary glasses.

"Choosing a present for a friend is always difficult. When it comes to clothes or accessories, people often just follow their own preferences, and the same goes for furniture or other interior goods. Cars and other art goods like what my family would do are out of the question, too. That said, food or anything one-use will only leave sadness behind once it's gone. Gift cards or anything of that sort makes it only feel like you didn't have the time or energy to actually give the present a proper thought… which works if it's someone you're not all too close with. And my template present of handing out membership cards for restaurants is only going to scare off younger people. In that sense, something miscellaneous you can use in your daily life is probably what you want to aim for. Especially the type of item that you wouldn't buy yourself but you'd definitely feel happy when getting. And this high-grade ladle is exactly that. Most people who cook have their own preferences when it comes to cooking knives or other cooking utensils, but nobody is really all too fixated on ladles. Not only that, I didn't even know that high-grade ladles even existed, so the surprise earned it a lot of points, too. I give it a perfect 100 points as a present, Tomoka-chan."

"Thank goodness…"

Tomoka had listened to Yukari's machinegun talk with a nervous expression, only to sigh in relief.

"To be perfectly honest, I felt like a ladle like this might be a bit much, and I thought of getting something a bit more…safe. Since you said you liked working with herbariums, something in that direction, see. But as you said, when it comes to interior furniture or anything along those lines, you tend to choose something matching your own preferences, so I figured it wouldn't make that great of a present. Especially when it's handmade. Nobody would be happy about an amateur's work, after all!" Tomoka seemed happy to have her present praised as she rambled on, but…

“Well… Sorry, I guess,” Yukari grumbled to herself.

“Huh? Sensei?” Tomoka was confused.

“For my birthday, I got a herbarium as a present from her… Handmade.” Ayu explained.

“Wha…” Tomoka’s expression grew stiff.

Yukari continued to pout.

“Since our birthdays were close, we decided we’d give each other handmade herbariums as a present. I was the one who suggested it, too.”

Tomoka awkwardly looked around.

“I think… what matters the most with presents are the feelings you have for the person!” She used her cute voice to convey this notion as if she genuinely believed it, which made Yukari burst out laughing.

“Tomoka-chan, that’s the exact opposite of what you said earlier, right?”

“Th-That’s… I mean, it depends on the person! I would be happy to have anything you made yourself!”

“Really? Then do you want a failed attempt of an herbarium that I’ve kept in my storage, or an odd plate I made in art class years and years ago?”

“I don’t think those count as presents… And I’m not your local garbage collector.”

Yukari seemed bothered by that.

“But it’s not garbage. It’s just stuff of odd origin that doesn’t have a place in my storage that I’m looking to get rid of.”

“Either way, I won’t be happy to get something like that. At least give me something that you made with your heart.”

“Okay, okay. Then I’ll give you a gift card or something like that for your birthday.”

“That’s the one you give to people you’re not too close with!” Tomoka retorted, which made Yukari laugh.

“Now, let’s get to that toast. The food is going to get cold.”

The three raised their glasses, tapping them together.

“Time to test out that high-grade ladle,” Yukari took a sip from her drink and then scooped up some of the paella with the ladle. “Oh, you’re right. It’s as smooth as before,” Yukari spoke with a voice of admiration.

“Really? Then let me try it later, too,” asked Ayu.

“Sure,” Yukari responded.

Ayu then realized that, during their whole exchange, Tomoka seemed oddly disgruntled.

*

As they enjoyed Ayu’s cooking, made for humans this time around, they talked about this and that and had some more to drink. Yukari finished a bottle of Belgian ale (9% alcohol). Since she was not exactly strong with her liquor, she was completely drunk soon after. She only knew that she was drunk and that she shouldn’t have any more, but even though her head wasn’t working properly and her body felt stiff, she still felt comfortable.

“Wooow, my head feels so fluffy.”

“Haven’t you had too much to drink, Yukari-san?” Ayu asked, genuinely worried.

“I’m fine… It might look like I’m drunk… But the person inside of me isn’t~”

“I don’t get it.”

“Sensei is so cute when she’s drunk.” Tomoka mumbled, covering her mouth with her hand.

“I said I’m not drunk… Only my outer self is drunk… The person inside ish fine…”

“Yeah, that last part made it obvious that you’re drunk.”

“But I’m not druuunk!”

Yukari wanted to prove that she was still doing just fine, so she reached for the beer bottle, but her grasp was so weak that the bottle fell over. Luckily, it was already empty, so it didn’t create much of a mess.

“I swear… See? All the alcohol is gone,” Ayu grabbed the bottle and shook it.

“No more alcohol? Whyyy…?”

“Because you already drank everything.”

“A-Anyway, I think I should be excusing myself now, Sensei.”

Watching the exchange between Yukari and Ayu, Tomoka flashed a wry smile.

“Whaaat? You’re leaving already?”

“It’s already past 10 pm… And we can always have dinner again sometime.”

“Yeah… Bye-bye…” Yukari said, waving her head left and right.

“Yes, thanks for having me,” Tomoka grabbed her belongings and put on her mask, standing up from her seat. “Actually, Shirakawa-san? Mind coming with me to the entrance?”

“Huh? S-Sure,” Ayu was a bit bewildered but still nodded along, so they left Yukari behind in the room.

*

Ayu and Tomoka reached the front entrance of the flat, not speaking a word on the way. Ayu stopped in her tracks and spoke up.

“So… Um, until next time?”

Right after she uttered those words, Tomoka spun around and glared at Ayu's face. Yet, being glared at by a beauty with thousands of fans still made Ayu's heart skip a beat. She took a few steps back, but Tomoka kept closing in on her until her back was against the wall.

"U-Um… Suhara-san?" Ayu meekly asked.

Tomoka hesitated for a moment, but she seemed to make up her mind and spoke up again.

"H-How do you feel about Sensei?"

—*Ah, so that's what this is.*

The moment Ayu heard those words, everything made sense. The gaze she directed at Yukari wasn't one you would have toward your favorite author. Since Ayu felt the same way, she knew all too well what that passion in Tomoka's eyes meant.

"So you do like Yukari-san… right?" Ayu put it into words to erase any final doubt.

As expected, Tomoka's face turned red, as she glanced all around until her gaze dropped down to her feet.

"…I do like her," she affirmed with a quivering voice.

"But… Aren't you already dating someone…?"

"Say what?" Tomoka raised her head and gave Ayu a bewildered look. "Of course I'm not. Where did you get that information from? 5ch?"

"Um… I was watching an interview for an upcoming anime… And you were acting really close with one of the other staff members."

"Interview… Which one?"

"The one for Yukari-san's…"

"Ahh… Loser Hottie? You mean… the actress for the main character, Wara-san?"

“I don’t think so… I think she was some kind of female knight…”

“Ah, her? Geez, that was just business yuri, nothing more.”

“Business… yuri?” Ayu returned the question, unable to grasp what exactly that meant.

“When two voice actresses act all lovey-dovey to create the misconception that they might be dating.”

“…? Why would you do that?”

“Because it makes a lot of people happy, of course. Especially when it comes to male fans. Showing that we wouldn’t have a boyfriend and instead choose to be close with women helps boost our popularity.”

“I see…”

Ayu knew that there were a lot of people who genuinely enjoyed works with same-sex romance. In that sense, just like Ayu saw idols or voice actresses as people from a different world, Tomoka’s fans might watch the business yuri from a similar perspective.

“So you don’t actually like her?”

“I do like her as a colleague. But in the end, we’re all fighting each other for roles, and I don’t see any reason to get any closer to her than necessary.”

“But in the video, you talked about going on dates…”

“That’s just a bonus. She’s straight and has a boyfriend. But of course, that’s just between us, so no talking about it online.”

“O-Okay…”

Upon learning about something she felt like she shouldn’t, Ayu panicked and nodded along.

“And forget about that!” Tomoka pushed her face closer. “Please answer my question. How do you feel about Sensei?”

Tomoka’s genuine tone made Ayu falter. Answering that question would show that she was a lesbian. Remembering her experience back home, a cold sweat ran down her back. However, Tomoka was the first person who was the same as her, and they had even fallen in love with the same person. She didn’t want to lie to her. Even if her answer might end up hurting Tomoka, and even if she started hating her, hiding it now would make Ayu feel like she’d lose the right to date Yukari. So…

“I like Yukari-san.”

“I knew it—”

“And I’m going out with her.”

“…Huuuh?!” Tomoka screamed in utter terror.

Right then, a man wearing a suit appeared from the entrance. He gave Tomoka a dubious look, so she said ‘Let’s head somewhere else’ and dragged Ayu along. They sat down on a bench near a children’s park and continued their conversation.

“…So, is it true? Are you really going out with Sensei?”

Tomoka’s voice burned with hostility which made Ayu falter, but she still nodded along and said ‘Yes, it’s true.’

“But isn’t she straight…?”

As far as she knew, Yukari was attracted to the opposite sex.

“That’s what I thought, but when I confessed, she agreed to go out with me.”

“N-No way…” Tomoka began tearing up.

Ayu could understand how she felt. If she was in Tomoka’s position, she probably would be crying, too. As their sexualities didn’t seem to line up, she thought that this love could never be fulfilled, yet now she had heard that her crush began dating someone of the same sex, making her feel regret that she never confessed in the first place.

“Whyyy…!” Tomoka drooped her shoulders, leaving Ayu uncertain of what she should even say in this situation.

After a brief silence…

“Did you already…” Tomoka muttered.

“Huh? What?” Ayu returned a question, since she didn’t quite catch what Tomoka said.

“D-Did you kiss already?”

“Huh…?!” Ayu’s face turned red in an instant.

Seeing that reaction, Tomoka pouted.

“So you did…”

“…Yes,” Ayu nodded with a beet red face.

“Th-Then… Did you do it?” Tomoka asked with a quiet voice. Ayu looked away and nodded once more.

Upon finding out the truth, Tomoka’s face distorted in despair.

“Ugh… Why…? That’s all way too fast. It’s been half a year since I left Sarubobo in her care. It’s like I sent up a three-year plan to make my crush fall to the yuri side only for a random new character to appear which turned me into the losing heroine… What am I even saying?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t really get it…”

Ayu was not sure what to say or think when listening to Tomoka, who was rambling on and on in a single breath. It was honestly pretty terrifying.

“After raising her affection for me for about a year… I ended up with nothing. I’m useless, I’m a laughingstock… Where did I go wrong? How did you beat me? Even if it was a difference in environment, that’s just asdalsdcoghas…!”

Tomoka continued to mumble random words and sentences that made no sense, some kind of net slang or online names, anime or manga, until she eventually took off her mask and—

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

As you would expect from a professional voice actress, her lung volume was anything unlike what Ayu could ever manage. Once she let out all her energy, she took a deep breath.

“Ah, you’re back,” Ayu sighed in relief.

“…Why did you even start working at her place?” Tomoka asked.

“Actually, her editor is my cousin, so…”

“Oh yeah, I think her last name was also Shirakawa…”

Ayu nodded and then explained about everything that had happened until she came to Tokyo, which included her origin story back home.

“…That’s just shitty,” Tomoka cursed once Ayu was done talking. “That friend of yours who just outed you is awful, too, and that village of yours and its villagers supporting this kind of homophobia can go to hell, too. You made the right choice by running away.”

Outing refers to the act of leaking someone’s sexuality or sexual preference without their consent. Homophobia, in return, showed distaste or fear of gay people. Of course, being discriminated against because of these feelings is utterly reproachable, but the act of discrimination was not strictly forbidden. Even so, most people know not to do it (at least in concept) and they follow these societal expectations (at least on the surface).

“Do the people around you know?”

“My family, as well as my manager and the owner of the agency.”

“Have they ever… shown any kind of disgust toward you because of that?”

“Never. They definitely were shocked, though.”

“I’m so jealous,” said Ayu, which tickled out a self-deprecating sigh from Tomoka.

“Though I never told Ebirou-sensei… Because I was scared.”

“…I get that.”

“But you still confessed to her, right? That’s amazing.” Tomoka looked up at the sky and sighed again.

“…Hey, what do you like about Sensei?”

“Huh?” The sudden question threw Ayu off, so she had to think about it.

“…Her face, I guess?”

“Huuuuuuh?!” Tomoka screamed with open eyes. “I mean, her face is absolutely beautiful… Ultimately beautiful, but that’s the first thing?!”

“I…I fell in love with her at first sight, so what am I supposed to say?! And what do you like about her?”

Ayu’s question was met with Tomoka puffing out her chest.

“I didn’t get attracted to her looks! I’ve been a fan of hers since her debut work, and I’ve watched everything about her works, like movies or dramas, and when one of her works got an anime, I poured my life into trying to get the role of the main heroine. When I saw her on the day of the first recording, I was blown away because of how beautiful she is! And so, the author I always admired turned out to be a beauty in my total strike zone, so obviously I thought that it was destiny!”

Yeah, going this far to become the main heroine for the anime definitely deserves respect. She definitely feels nothing but love for Ebirou Hikari's works. However…

"In the end, you just chose her because of her looks, right?"

"Say what?" Tomika narrowed her eyes.

"You fell in love with her on the day of the recording, no?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? I've liked her since her debut work."

"Sure, but that's just as a fan, isn't it? You only fell in love with her for real after you saw her in person."

"O-Of course not, I could always tell just how wonderful of a person she was from the moment I read her works," Tomika tried to desperately argue for her case, looking for the right words.

"Then if Yukari-san turned out to be a buff macho woman who looked like a gorilla with thick fur and hairy ears, would you have fallen in love with her?"

"That's… Urgh…!" Tomoka was backed into a corner, with no way of escaping the hole she had dug herself.

Meanwhile, Ayu gave her a smug grin, like she had won the competition.

"See? So it was her face."

"I-I can admit that her face may have been what started it, but that's not all!"

"It's not like her face is all I like about her, either."

"Then what else do you like?"

"Erm…"

Ayu stopped to think about it. She might be an adult, but she was a pretty lousy person, so Ayu wasn't exactly feeling much in terms of respect toward her, and since she never had even read one of her novels, she doesn't know her strengths as an author.

“…Her body, I guess?”

“You’re the worst!” Tomoka roared in anger, so Ayu tried to explain herself.

“B-But… Her body is incredibly beautiful, and—”

“Nooooo! I don’t wanna hear it! I’m going to die because I’m so jealous!” Tomoka covered her ears and screamed.

Ayumu flashed a wry smile.

“But her looks really aren’t everything for me. I’m not an author like her, so I can’t say it too well, but… I do like what she has on the inside. I…I love her.”

That’s why Ayu confessed in the heat of the moment. If it was just her looks, she wouldn’t have gone this far.

“…Hmph.” Tomika listened to Ayu’s desperate words and sulked. “I get it already. No more. You’re probably just going to keep bragging forever.”

“Right…”

“So which of her works do you like the most?”

“That sure came out of nowhere,” Ayu said, which evoked a wry smile from Tomoka.

“I rarely get the chance to talk about my favorite books with a girl my age, you know?”

Considering how busy she was at work, and how limited her environment was for talking with people her age, having the time or chance for a conversation like this might be extremely limited. If possible, Ayu wanted to respond to those feelings, but…

“I’m sorry, I’ve never actually read one of her novels…”

“Whaaat?!” Tomoka’s eyes shot wide open, colored in bewilderment.

“Whenever I read books, I just get so sleepy…”

“You’re going out with Ebirou-sensei…No, with an author, and yet you’re not even reading their work?!” Tomoka began quivering, so Ayu felt panicky.

“But I did watch the movie DVD for [Search of the Heart]!”

“That shitty movie barely counts as something she’s produced!” Tomoka declared without hesitation.

Personally, Ayu quite enjoyed that movie.

“Now that I think about it, I think Yukari-san said she didn’t consider that movie as something she created…”

“See!” Tomoka showed a smug face for some reason. “Ebirou-sensei’s true talent doesn’t show unless you read one of her novels! Trying to transfer it into any other media is impossible!”

“Huh?! Even though you’re in an anime based on one of her works?”

Ayu’s comment made Tomoka falter.

“Th-That’s different! That anime won’t ever be able to pull out the greatness of the source material, so I figured someone like me, who truly adores what it’s based on and loves it more than anybody else, would be able to draw out its charm just a bit more!”

“That’s… one hell of a statement.”

Ayu was rather… No, tremendously bewildered by that reaction, but she had to admire the confidence that Tomoka showed.

“More than anything, the great thing about Ebirou Hikari’s works is—”

From that point on, Tomoka kept on blabbering about Yukari’s novels and what she loved about them. Ayu mostly just let that slide, but she understood how much Tomoka actually liked the series.

“And that being the case, you definitely have to read Sensei’s books! You’re missing out on your life! You can ignore most adaptations, but you should at

least watch the final episode of ‘Sonko’s Strategy of War,’ because it has some value.”

“Just the final episode…? What about the anime you appear in?”

“There’s no meaning in watching that! They just focus on comedy and lewd crap, so the battle against the unreasonable destiny so prominent in the original novel takes the backstage!”

Tomoka showed no remorse toward even works she participated in, which caused Ayu to admire her but also worry that she might get canceled online if she ever let this slip.

“Right… Well, I’ll give them a shot if I ever feel like it…”

“Not just if you feel like it! You’d better read them! Even if it kills you! Right after you get home! And once you finish one volume, you’d better report back to me on LINE!”

“Ergh…” Ayu didn’t try to hide her disdain, so Tomoka fired off more shots.

“Pathetic… I guess I’m the one who’s worthy of being Sensei’s girlfriend after all.”

“…!”

Those nonchalant words from Tomoka stabbed Ayu right where it hurt. They may be about the same age and share the same sexuality, and yet Ayu was just a runaway girl who had never even read one of Yukari’s books. Meanwhile, Tomoka was a professional voice actress who deeply adored all of Ebirou Kairi’s works. It was clear and Ayu was not a good match for Yukari. Still, she gave Tomoka her LINE information and watched her drive off in a taxi she called. But even after Tomoka was gone, Ayu could only think about her saying ‘I guess I’m the one who’s worthy of being Sensei’s girlfriend.’

*

“Mhm…”

Yukari woke up from her slumber and pushed her body up from the table. She remembered that Tomoka had taken Ayu with her out of the apartment, but she must have fallen asleep after that. She looked at the time, and it was currently half past 11 pm. Ayu was nowhere to be seen, and the dishes and leftover food were still on the table. Usually, Ayu would clean up right after dinner was done, so she probably hadn't come home yet. Maybe she had gone to the convenience store after seeing Tomoka off. But even so, it had taken far too long for that. Maybe she got wrapped up in some sort of incident… Only bad thoughts filled Yukari's head as she stormed out of the living room, only for the front door to open and for Ayu to enter.

"Ayu!" Yukari screamed, which made her flustered.

"Y-Yes?! What is it?"

Yukari grew bashful.

"Erm, well… It took you quite some time, huh?"

"I'm sorry, I was talking with Suhara-san."

"Ah… I see."

During dinner, it seemed like Ayu and Tomoka had been cautious of each other, but they might have resolved that when it was just the two of them.

—*Maybe Ayu really has it easier talking to a girl her age…*

Yukari felt her chest tightening up with pain, which surprised her. Could this mean that she was jealous? Was she jealous that Ayu was getting along with a girl her age, not to mention a cute one like Tomoka? Was she anxious that Ayu might fall in love with someone else? That couldn't be. Ayu wasn't the type of girl who would switch from person to person this quickly. However, this was Tomoka she was talking about. A super popular idol and voice actress. She was different from the average girl you'd meet.

Lately, it felt like Ayu had taken complete control over Yukari. Originally, Ebiwara Yukari would have been a selfish and free character.

“Phew…”

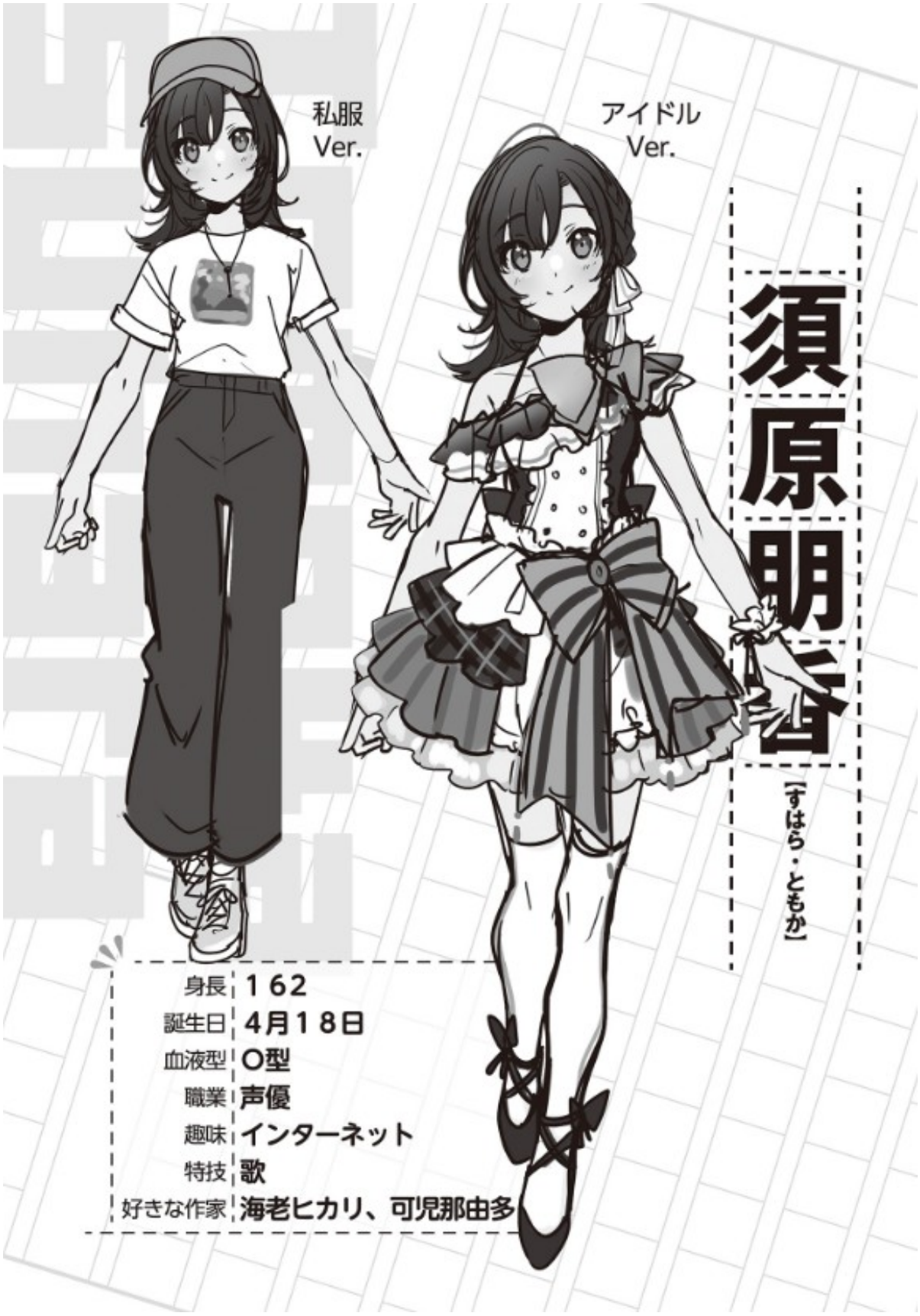
She forced her thoughts, probably still in disarray because of the alcohol, to calm down.

“What did you and Tomoka-chan talk about?”

“Ah, well…” Ayu made a gesture like she was thinking about her response. “She kept talking about your novels. That I’d miss out on life if I didn’t read them. She’s a crazy fan of yours.”

It did sound like Ayu was straying away from the main point of the situation, but…

“She really loves to exaggerate… My novels aren’t all that great,” Yukari ignored the feeling of discomfort in her chest and just played it off with a self-deprecating wry smile.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Chapter 5: Prayers Progress Before the Deadline

Two weeks had passed since Yukari attempted to run away from her deadline by escaping to Toyama, only to be dragged back by Miyako to pull an all-nighter to finish it. During that time, she was lovey-dovey with Ayu, ate cat food, and met up with Suhara Tomaka. Her private life was fulfilled and joyful, but she didn't make much progress with her manuscript. And even if she made it past one deadline, another would wait.

"I have to end it… These series of weights are being pressed down on me!"

"What are you talking about?"

Yukari's serious expression left Ayu bewildered as she sat across from her while eating breakfast.

"A deadline is getting close to me again, so let's run away."

"Again?! No, not this time!" Ayu panicked, but Yukari flashed an invincible grin.

"It's fine. We'll escape for sure this time. Last time, Mya-san managed to find us because of your social media, but now we're not going to upload anything. Or, we could upload pictures completely unrelated to where we're actually going."

"That's not what I meant! Please don't run away!"

"But you'd love to go on a trip again, right?"

"S-Sure, but even so…" Ayu faltered for a moment but remained strong. "Not until you finish your work! We can always go on a trip after your body is clean of any manuscript!"

“So you’re saying my body is dirty for as long as I haven’t finished my manuscript? Ayu, how could you say that…?” Yukari pretended to tear up.

“Th-That’s not what I meant!”

“And since I’m filthy the whole time, we won’t be able to have sex anymore…”

“Th-That would be bad!”

“You won’t listen to what I want, yet you keep pushing your own desires… Isn’t that a bit convenient for you?”

“Ugh…”

Ayu was met with a mischievous smirk from Yukari and started tearing up.

“B-But, we still can’t! Oh, I know. Until you finish your manuscript, I’ll cook all the food you want every single day. Would this help motivate you?”

“Food, huh?”

It might have sounded like a last-ditch effort of an idea, but Ayu’s cooking skill spoke for itself, so it sounded very enticing.

“…Anything I want?”

“Y-Yes!” Ayu nodded.

Yukari thought about it for a moment.

“Then I’d like spiny lobster,” she said emphatically.

It might come from the name ‘Ebiwara,’ which has the kanji for ‘shrimp’ in it, but the Ebiwara household always loved cooking shrimp or lobster to the point it became like a family food. Yukari loved a lot of shrimp dishes, such as tempura, fried shrimp, dried seafood in garlic oil, paella—Especially glass shrimp in tempura or seafood tempura, but Ise shrimp was one of her favorites, and there was never a birthday a New Year’s where they wouldn’t have it at least once.

“S-Spiny lobster…” Ayu made a troubled expression.

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t they incredibly expensive?”

“They sure are. The one we ate on my birthday was at least 10,000 yen.”

“That’s so much for a single lobster…”

Last month, Yukari did buy spiny lobster for her birthday which she bought at an expensive supermarket to make lobster thermidor, and Ayu remembered being shocked at the price, wondering if it was a good idea to buy them. In fact, Ayu had never made lobster thermidor before, and since she was too scared to use such an expensive ingredient to try a new dish, Yukari ended up making it instead.

“All right, so would you mind going to the supermarket in Shinjuku to buy around ten of them?”

“Ten?!”

“I’d like to try all sorts of dishes. Fried prawn in the afternoon, tempura in the evening, and for the next morning, you can make a salty grilled one. Oh, but if they sell them live, then please make some sashimi.”

Ayu shook her head.

“N-No way! I’ve never made any food with spiny lobster! And the only dish I’ve ever tried making was the thermi…thermite or whatever it was called gratin thing. That was a first for me!”

“But you said that you’d cook whatever I wanted, right?”

“If it’s a dish I’ve made before, that is!”

“Then you can just try it out. Knowing you, it’ll be delicious anyway. Well, the shell can be rather sturdy so pulling it off could take a bit of effort, and because of its sheer size, it can be complicated to heat properly. I’ve burned quite a few lobsters before thanks to that. It’s even more difficult if they’re still alive… But I believe you’ll make it as delicious as ever!”

“That much trust is too heavy for me. If I fail, 10,000 yen will go down the drain…” Ayu grew more and more terrified.

“I mean, you have to get used to using ingredients like that eventually. After all, we’ll be living together for the rest of our lives.”

“F-For the rest of…” Ayu blushed. “But even so, spiny lobsters are just… Can’t it be crab or beef? I’m confident in that.”

“Nope. I want spiny lobster now.”

She wasn’t being stubborn or anything like that, but when she said that she wanted to eat spiny lobster, her brain had entered spiny lobster mode.

“Just try it. If you fail, you can try again.”

“I wouldn’t have an issue with that if the ingredients weren’t so incredibly expensive! How about regular lobster? That’s only half of a spiny lobster’s price… which is still expensive, but…”

“Don’t act like lobsters and spiny lobsters are the same thing!”

“Y-Yukari-san…?”

Yukari’s sudden outburst and serious gaze scared Ayu.

“The two are completely different in terms of taste and consistency!”

“Really? I thought they were both just lobsters…”

“In what way?! They don’t even look alike at all!”

“…They don’t?”

“Just wait a second… Here!”

Yukari took out her phone and showed Ayu a picture of a spiny lobster and then a regular lobster.

“The spiny lobster looks like an armored warrior with its thick form and cool appearance, and the regular lobster looks like a berserker with giant claws.”

“…You’re right, they do look completely different. Though I think that a regular lobster looks stronger.”

“What’s more important than looks is the taste. The spiny lobster is incredibly delicious! So is the regular lobster, but not as good as the spiny one!”

“R-Right…”

“And as you might tell from the claws, it is a type of crayfish. How dare it declare itself a part of the lobster family. Even the biggest of lobster fans don’t know this fact.”

“I don’t think they made the decision about how they would like to be categorized…”

“Well, crayfish are friends of lobsters if you’re going to argue biologically. Overseas, people call them all just lobsters… But I just want you to know that they are completely different.”

“Ah, right…” Ayu gave a meek response. “So in reality, you’d have to try them out once to even be able to tell the difference… Oh.”

Ayu realized what she had said, and her expression stiffened. Yukari nodded and smiled.

“You’re absolutely right! You’d have to try it first to be able to tell!”

“Y-Yukari-san, calm down…”

“And so that you can cook spiny lobster perfectly, we should first eat some! So let’s go!”

“G-Go where…?”

“To the capital of spiny lobsters: Ise!”

“I-Ise…? Where is Ise again?”

“The Mie prefecture.”

“Mie… Where’s that? Also, hold on! We’re in Tokyo, remember?! We can just eat spiny lobster in a restaurant here.”

“That won’t do. We have to experience the genuine taste. This is all for your sake, Ayu! Ahhh, I can’t believe you’d force me to do this. I haven’t made any progress with my manuscript, but I can’t ignore your plea!” Yukari took out her smartphone and looked up restaurants and hotels, finishing up the reservation.

“All right, the hotel is reserved,” Yukari said and showed Ayu her phone screen.

“So fast! Aren’t you a bit too fast with that?!”

“Well, I’ve been to Ise several times already!”

“C-Cancel it right away!”

“Even if I canceled now, we’d still have to pay for the reservation. Wasting that money would be a shame, so we have to go now.”

“Ugh… I’m sorry, Miya-chan…”

Ayu was powerless to stop the mischievous Yukari and apologized to her employer. And so, their next escape trip was Mie’s Ise city.

*

The preparations for the trip were done in around 30 minutes, so Ayu and Yukari quickly left their home. Yukari had already prepared an emergency bag for Ayu, which included a change of clothes and underwear, sunscreen and makeup, as well as other necessities such as a phone charger and the like, so Ayu only had to grab her smartphone and she was ready. Granted, it was nice to have, but if she was this ready to just drop everything and leave, she might as well focus on her work instead. They took a taxi from the flat to the JR Shinagawa station, taking the Tokyo-Hokkaido bullet train to Nagoya.

“Since you won’t listen to me, I might as well do what Miya-chan said and break your knees…” Ayu grumbled as she looked outside the window.

“Don’t say scary stuff like that. Come on, open up,” Yukari said and stuffed some Baumkuchen into Ayu’s mouth, which she had bought at the train station earlier.

Since they decided to have spiny lobsters for lunch, they only packed a few snacks. That said, it wasn’t just regular Baumkuchen. It looked like a corn dog.

“I swear…” Ayu groaned and took a bite from the cake.

The batter melted away on top of her tongue, creating a strong sweetness inside her mouth.

“…It’s incredibly delicious.”

A feeling of bliss and happiness filled her and she couldn’t help but voice her pleasure with the taste.

“Right? I really love their Baumkuchen,” Yukari responded and took a bite from the cake herself.

Even though they had gone far beyond being flustered about an indirect kiss, Ayu could feel her face becoming hot. Along with the Baumkuchen, they also drank some coffee sold within the train, as well as some really frozen ice cream while they looked outside the windows.

“Ah, Yukari-san! Isn’t that Mt. Fuji over there?!”

“Hm? Oh yeah, I think so.”

Ayu could barely contain her excitement, but Yukari just calmly nodded along. Compared to when they saw it from the Skytree, it looked even taller now.

“Since we can see it from here, we should be in Shizuoka right now. The seafood here is quite delicious, too. We could do a seafood trip and stay at Memazu or Yaizu tomorrow. Though, since we’re in Mie, I’d like some Matsusaka beef too!” Yukari told her excitedly about her plans.

For this trip, they had only reserved a table at the restaurant in question and a one-day stay at the inn, so after they checked out of the inn tomorrow, they were free.

“You’re a free person, through and through…” Ayu said in slight exasperation, but she couldn’t help seeing Yukari as a shining beacon of confidence.

Adults like her were not a common sight back in the rural area where Ayu used to live. Attend a normal school, find a normal job, have a normal marriage, give birth to children, build a normal family—that is what Ayu’s parents saw as the ‘correct’ way of living. But what do people who aren’t born on the normal side do? What about the people who aren’t ‘normal’? Lie to yourself, pretend to be a normal person, and fake a ‘correct’ life?

When she looked at Yukari, Ayu felt like worrying about all that was pointless. But the reason Yukari could live this freely was because she was blessed with talent and a fortunate environment. Could someone like Ayu, who was average in every aspect, even stay by her side? As all these negative emotions rushed into her head, her smartphone suddenly vibrated. When she checked it, she had received a LINE message from Suhara Tomoka.

Have you finished reading it yet?

“LINE?! It can’t be, did Mya-san smell that something was off?!” Yukari asked in shock.

“No, it’s fine. It’s Tomoka-san.”

Ayu was told to report back to her whenever she finished one of Yukari’s novels, but she still couldn’t bring herself to read books so she just let it slide until Tomoka contacted her two days later with this exact message. Ayu then told her she hadn’t, so Tomoka acknowledged this and said “Fine, then you can start with the comic for ‘Search for the Heart’ instead” and so Ayu did just that. However, it was completely different from the movie version, and

when Ayu told Tomoka that it was a lot more enjoyable, she urged her to check out the source material next. So she tried to read the novel again.

Since she knew the basic outline thanks to the comic and could picture the characters' faces, she found it a lot easier to read this time. But because this was still rather new for her, Ayu's reading speed was rather slow. Even so, now Tomoka knew that Ayu was reading the novel, so she would ask for her status pretty much every day to then discuss recent events and almost spoil things. But it was clear she was enjoying herself. And spoiling was impossible since Ayu had already read the ending thanks to the comic.

Either way, that's the reason Tomoka and Ayu had been keeping in touch over LINE or phone calls on the daily. Of course, she couldn't let a popular voice actress wait, so she would respond whenever she had the time. That said, Ayu had a sneaking suspicion that Tomoka might not have any friends. Ayu wanted to take good care of the first lesbian friend she had found, even though she can't erase the feeling of inferiority.

"…You're chatting with Tomoka-chan on LINE?"

Ayu answered Yukari's question with a brief nod and "Ah, yes" and responded to Tomoka's message. Tomoka urged her to read the ending, so Ayu added 'I'm going on a trip, so I can't.'

A trip?! With Sensei?!

Yeah. On bullet train rn.

No waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!

Ayu responded to that outburst with a bashful emoji.

Where u going?!

Ise.

Tomoka then sent an emote of Nico Robin screaming "I want to go!" to vent her frustration… Except in the actual scene it was "I want to live!" Ayu flashed a wry smile and typed up her next message.

Want a souvenir?

Hell no. Gimme pictures of Sensei.

Gotcha.

Something hyper zesty!

…Hyper zesty? Sometimes, Tomoka used words that confused Ayu.

What does that mean?

I want lewd pictures of Sensei!

What a moron.

That's not happening.

How about 10k for one?

No.

Maybe 50k?

No deal.

I'll send you my nudes instead.

I know you're probably just joking, but you shouldn't say that.

For real. On god fr fr.

"On god…fr fr…?" Ayu was so bewildered he accidentally read that part out loud.

A short while later, Tomoka sent an emote that said "I'm sorry," and Ayu responded with a smile emote.

"…You're having fun, huh?" Yukari said in a somewhat sulking tone.

"Ah, well, I guess. The way she chats is just so unlike anything I've ever seen."

Yukari gave her a dubious look. "Really? I always feel like she's extremely polite despite her age."

“I’m not surprised that’s how she acts around you…”

“Is she more frank with you? Because you’re closer in terms of age?”

“That might be part of it, yes.”

“What do you two talk about?”

Well, she couldn’t possibly tell Yukari that Tomoka had asked for her nudes.

“Mostly about your book. Though I still haven’t finished ‘Search for the Heart’.”

“You don’t have to read that,” Yukari said with a troubled expression, but a smile left her lips. “Though… I think I’d be happy if you read it.”

—I don’t want people to have expectations of me. I don’t want to be like a protagonist or heroine. I don’t need to be special to anybody.

Ayu remembered what Yukari had said, which she had uttered with tears in her eyes. Even though she didn’t want to be special to anybody, she had now become special to Ayu. While Ayu felt happy, she wondered if she was that special to Yukari.

“What’s wrong, Ayu?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. I’m going to read all of your novels, I promise. Even if I get really sleepy!”

“…You don’t have to force yourself like that…” Yukari pouted.

*

They got off the bullet train in Nagoya and got on a regular line. Roughly an hour and a half later, they finally reached Ise city. It was currently half past 1 pm. They headed for the restaurant where they had placed a reservation and ordered their food. They ordered white rice, tea, and all kinds of spiny lobster. Spiny lobster sashimi, tempura, salt-grilled spiny lobster, spiny lobster miso soup… They completely ignored the daily menu for that.

“Sh-Should we really order this much?” Ayu looked at the price of the menu and grew worried, but Yukari just laughed it off.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“B-But…”

“Then you can just see this as a way of learning.”

“A way of learning what?” Ayu asked with a dubious look.

“It’s a necessary process for you to learn how to cook spiny lobsters. If your cooking repertoire grows, then I benefit from it. It’s an investment on my end if you manage to cook food that’s even more delicious.”

“Learn… Investment…” Ayu thought it over for a moment. “I…I’ll do my best so your efforts won’t end up in vain!” She said with a motivated tone.

“There’s no need to tense up like that. The food always gets better the more relaxed you are,” Yukari said, admiring how cute and diligent Ayu was.

And with that discussion over, the two continued to enjoy the luxurious spiny lobster dishes. The lobster thermidor Yukari had made on her birthday was delicious, but it couldn’t compare to a professional cook with fresh ingredients. The way to fry and grill it, and the right amount of salt, it all emphasized the taste of the lobster.

“What do you think, Ayu?” Yukari asked the girl, who had been carefully chewing on every dish.

“…I think I’ll remember the taste. All that’s left is to practice.”

She responded like she was a character from a cooking manga, making Yukari burst out laughing. After they enjoyed their luxurious dinner and left the restaurant, they headed for the hotel next. They put their belongings in their room, washed off their sweat in the large bath, and then played games together until it was time for dinner. The hotel prepared spiny lobster pasta and thermidor. Fully satiated on Ise’s spiny lobster, Yukari went to take another bath and then got devoured by Ayu late at night.

“So, Ayu, what was the most delicious thing you had today?” Yukari asked the girl as they shared each other’s warmth.

Ayu thought about it for a moment.

“Yukari-san,” she answered, running her tongue along Yukari’s neck.

The following morning, the two of them enjoyed a pleasant breakfast and checked out of the hotel, then departed for the Ise Shinto shrine. When Yukari decided on that, Ayu didn’t seem all too into it.

“It’s basically like a temple, right? I don’t know what’s so interesting about that…”

Yukari gave a wry smile in the face of a youngster’s opinion.

“It’s an actual shrine this time. But don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Really?”

Ayu was still dubious but joined Yukari on the bus in the direction of the shrine. They got off at a bus stop shortly after that and soon reached the outer shrine. Usually, for a proper shrine visit, you could check out the outer temple and then head inside, but they ignored the outer shrine for now. After heading inside, they crossed the Uji Bridge and went through the shrine archway, walking the path up to the shrine. The path was filled with gravel, with tall trees growing on both sides. The sun shone down on the ground from the gaps between the green leaves. The air was quiet and peaceful, and only the sound of chirping birds and crunching gravel could be heard. Even though Yukari wasn’t very religious, she could feel the holy atmosphere drifting through the air.

“Yeah… This is pretty amazing,” Ayu mumbled as she looked up at the trees.

They cleaned their hands at the ritual place and then checked out the inner shrine, took pictures, and walked down the path until they reached the main shrine, Ise Grand Shrine. Inside was one of the three Imperial regalia of

Japan, the one that belonged to Japan’s greatest Goddess Amaterasu Oomikami.

“So I just have to offer a prayer?” Ayu asked.

“Ise Grand Shrine isn’t a place to make wishes in general. It’s to offer your gratitude to the gods. There are other places to state your wishes, so maybe thank them for something?”

Upon hearing that, Ayu began blushing faintly.

“Th-Then I’ll thank them for allowing me to meet Yukari-san.”

Hearing such a straightforward response, Yukari grew flustered, herself.

“I-I see…Then I’ll do the same.”

The two of them climbed up the stairs and then stood in front of the palace. They bowed, clapped their hands together twice, and then thanked the gods for meeting each other. Finally, they bowed again and moved away from the main shrine, heading to a minor shrine, the Aramatsuri Temple. The minor shrine wasn’t as big as the main shrine. It was one of the two temples apart from the Kazahinomi Temple. Aramatsuri Temple was used to offer your own wishes. They did the same procedure as before, and Yukari thought about what to wish for.

—*I hope that I can always be together with Ayu.*

She closed her eyes and voiced her wish. Once they both were done, they walked down the pathway again.

“What did you wish for, Ayu?” Yukari asked.

Ayu began blushing again.

“That the two of us can always be together…”

Hearing that from Ayu, Yukari was way more embarrassed than she thought she would be.

“That is quite the cliche wish, don’t you think?” Yukari laughed with a red face, but Ayu just pouted.

“Then what did you wish for?”

“That my manuscript is magically finished once I get back,” Yukari lied on the spot so as to not embarrass herself.

“You used a prayer for that?! Don’t tell me we came to Ise Grand Shrine just for that?!” Ayu couldn’t hide her contempt, but Yukari just laughed it off.

“Honestly, without some miracle or divine intervention, I don’t think I will be making it in time. Maybe I should have wished for the concept of deadlines to disappear instead.”

“I swear…There’s no way the gods would grant the wish of someone as lazy like you,” Ayu said and sighed.

*

After they finished visiting the temples, they bought charms at the Kagura hall and then entered the assembly hall. The assembly hall was something like a rest area, with seats and places to buy cold drinks or tea.

“Phew…We worked up quite a sweat, huh?” Ayu said as she sat on a chair, wiping away the sweat on her forehead with a handkerchief.

“That’s true,” Yukari said.

They had only checked out the inner shrine, but simply walking down the regular path made them feel like they had walked quite a long distance. The biggest problem was the temperature. It was currently the middle of July, and the sky was clear. As a result, it was hot. Luckily, the leaves on the trees created enough shade for the most part, but the air was humid enough to make you produce a lot of sweat. Ayu remembered Yukari saying ‘You’ll surely come to like it’ before they departed.

“I have to say, this place sure is beautiful and a bit… divine. Like I’ve been given a portion of their power. Though I wish it wasn’t so hot today.”

Yukari flashed a wry smile.

“Yeah, shrine visits usually are better done when it’s not boiling outside.”

“That’s true. So what do we do after this?”

Ayu hadn’t heard anything about their plans after their visit to Ise Grand shrine, so she asked Yukari this. She made a mischievous smile in response.

“What are you talking about? This is where the real shrine visit begins.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, let’s go,” Yukari gulped down the rest of her water and stood up.

“Go… where, exactly?” Ayu quickly followed her.

They stepped out of the hall and crossed the bridge, leaving the inner shrine. Yukari started walking in a different direction from the bus stop. Shortly after, they reached a street with several souvenir shops and restaurants.

“Going to the shrine is fine and dandy, but you can’t forget about this!”

The sight in front of them was the exact opposite of the tranquil atmosphere back inside the shine. It felt like they had walked right into a popular tourist spot.

Yukari smiled. “This is Oharaimachi, Ise Grand Shrine’s Torimaemachi.”

“Torimaemachi?”

“You know how the bigger shrines get a lot of visitors, right? A lot of businesses and shops open up right in front of the entrance to sell goods, which you call a Torimaemachi, literally a small town before the shrine archway. Not only that, but Ise Grand Shrine has been the singular shrine to visit at least once in your life ever since the Edo period, so their Torimaemachi is as impressive as you would expect,” Yukari explained as she walked down the path.

Ayu listened to this as she looked around. Most of the buildings looked old and were made of wood, but the path itself was made of clean stone. Despite

that, there were children standing around, vending machines here and there, and even ice cream stalls, which made it feel like modern and traditional Japan had met in one place. Ise udon, kneaded suji, Ise tea, pot dishes, grilled seafood, beef skewers, ice cream, Matsusaka beef croquettes, chopped eel on rice… Just reading the menus made you feel hungry. A pleasant scent drifted in the air, which almost made you drunk on it.

“Um, Yukari-san?”

“Yeah?”

“Could we eat something here?!” Ayu couldn’t hold herself back any longer, and Yukari smiled.

“Of course we can. But our first dish of the day has already been decided.”

They walked down the street for about five minutes, then took a left and stood next to a sign that read “Blessing Bystreet.” As they walked down this street, they started seeing more older buildings that you’d expect were from the Meiji Period. It felt like they had traveled back in time. Yukari entered one store in this vicinity, with Ayu following her. The curtain hanging down from the ceiling read “Dango and Sweets Shop.”

“I’d like two portions of anko-coated shaved ice, please,” Yukari told the owner her order and finished paying.

“Anko-coated shaved ice?” Ayu asked Yukari while they waited for their order.

She had never tried this herself, but she’d a lot of billboards talking about anko-coated food all around Mie, and they even sold this in the hotel. Filling mochi with anko seemed to be a famous dish around these parts.

“That’s right. The regular anko-coated mochi is also delicious, so we have to buy some before we head home.”

Shortly after, the anko-coated shaved ice was done, so the two accepted it from the employee. On the surface, it looked like regular shaved ice, just a bit

bigger in size. The syrup on it was green, so it might be green tea flavor. Shaved ice was a great thing during the heat, but Ayu would have preferred strawberry or melon flavor instead. They sat down on a bench outside, and Yukari didn't waste any time before taking a bite. Ayu did the same, spooning some shaved ice into her mouth. The fulfilling sweetness had a glimmer of bitterness, as the cold ice did help cool her hot body. The more she dug into the ice cream, the more she encountered red bean paste and mochi. She scooped up some of the bean paste, the mochi soft enough that the spoon cut it apart, as well as the ice and tea syrup. All of their different levels of sweetness and consistencies mixed into one and melted away, creating an extremely sweet sensation in her mouth.

"It's so sweet and delicious…"

"Right?" Yukari responded with a smile.

"This might be the best shaved ice I've ever had."

Granted, Ayu was never the type to eat much shaved ice, and the best she had was stuff from festival stalls and the supermarket's food corner.

"Same here. The ones in Harajuku and Taiwan were pretty good, but this is definitely the best for me."

Ayu would love to try out those, too. Of course, with Yukari by her side.

"This anko-coated shaved ice is actually limited to the summer season… and other than that, you can only eat manufactured and store-bought anko-coated shaved ice cream like this."

"I see. Yeah, I guess it was worth coming to Ise to eat this," Ayu nodded while eating.

"Right?" Yukari smiled. "Well, I said that it's limited to summer, but that usually lasts from the latter half of April all the way to the end of September, and there's a store at Nagoya train station that sells this, too."

"Huh?"

“That said, it really tastes the best when you’re sitting in an old shop like this, battling the heat,” Yukari pointed out, and Ayu found herself agreeing.

When it’s hot outside, cold food always tastes better, and the sight of Yukari eating the shaved ice in front of her Ayu was like a painting. Ayu stopped eating for a moment and took a picture of Yukari.

“Hey, not while I’m eating!” Yukari stopped right before she was about to take a bite and complained.

“You’re just so cute that I couldn’t help myself. It’d be even better if you were wearing a yukata,” Ayu said, her words making Yukari’s eyes shoot wide open.

“A yukata…! Since I usually just come here by myself, I’d never even thought of that. Then let’s change into yukata after we’re done here. I think there’s a rental shop around here.”

“Huh?! N-No, you don’t have to…”

“But I want to see you in a yukata too, Ayu.”

“R-Really? Then I guess we’ll have to…”

Met with Yukari’s serious face, Ayu blushed and filled her spoon with a large portion of shaved ice, gulping it down. As a result, a sharp pain assaulted her brain.

“Ugh…!”

“Did that hurt?”

Ayu nodded.

“That’s brain freeze from ice cream, all right. You’d better be careful,” Yukari responded and smiled.

“Brain freeze?”

“It’s a medical term. Your brain mistakes the coldness for pain, and your body tries to warm the inside of your mouth by sending blood over to your blood cells. This creates swelling, which causes the pain. In really extreme cases, it can cause internal bleeding and you could die from it.”

“D-Die…?!”

Ayu grew terrified and looked at the shaved ice. Her head still hurt. Could it be internal bleeding?

“What do I do? It still hurts… What if it doesn’t get better…?”

“Huh?! Still?! That’s bad, usually it doesn’t last that long. It might be too late…”

“N-No way…”

Yukari answered Ayu’s worries with a straight face until she eventually burst out laughing.

“Y-Yukari-san?!”

“I was just kidding. Nobody has ever died of brain freeze.”

“Th-Thank goodness…” Ayu sighed in relief with tears in her eyes. “Also, can you stop teasing me?!” Ayu protested, and Yukari laughed it off while apologizing.

“By the way, whenever you have brain freeze, you just have to cool your forehead,” Yukari said and placed the plate with the shaved ice against Ayu’s forehead.

*

After they were done eating, they headed over to the rental shop and changed into the yukata, then went to eat more food.

“That reminds me, you mentioned that you could only eat anko-coated shaved ice here, but the store didn’t have anything related to that in its name,” Ayu walked around and commented as she saw a billboard of a store that read ‘anko-coated.’

“That store basically manages all the smaller stores that sell anko-coated food here.”

“Is that so?”

“In fact, Blessing Bystreet was built as the center of the Torimaemachi and anko-coated mochi here. It’s like a theme park that has existed since the Edo

period through the Meiji period. Though it’s a bit hard to see considering today’s state. At least there’s no entry fee.”

“I see… Well, Blessing Bystreet does feel like we actually traveled back in time, unlike this street here.”

“Pfft,” Yukari burst out laughing from Ayu’s odd way of phrasing things.

They then walked ahead, eating Matsusaka beef skewers, abalone skewers, fried food with potatoes, Ise croquettes, grilled meat, black honey dango, and any other interesting food they saw on the way, finally washing it down with some beer and fresh juice. Both Yukari and Ayu were small gluttons in their own right, but after eating this much, they were absolutely full. And as a final conclusion…

“Yukata aren’t made to eat and walk around in.”

“That’s true…”

The two sat down at a small cafe and took a break as they discussed these impressions. Yukata are especially difficult to move in if you’re not used to it, and the geta clogs don’t make that any easier. You have to be careful to not get the yukata dirty from the food, too, and when your belly is full, the obi around your stomach only puts more pressure on you.

“We did take a lot of pictures, though, so I think we can return them now.”

“That’s also true. What do we do after that?” Ayu asked.

“There’s still plenty of food I’d like to eat, so we could spend another night in Ise and come back here tomorrow?”

“That sounds good! I’d like to try that kneaded sushi, too!” Ayu answered with a smile.

It seemed like she had completely forgotten her job of ensuring that Yukari would do her job properly.

“Then let me rent a room right away…”

Yukari took out her smartphone and started to make a reservation at a nearby hotel when someone walked by in front of her. For some reason, that person stopped to face Yukari. Judging from the shoes, it was a woman.

“…”

Yukari felt an incredibly bad premonition and slowly raised her head, only to be greeted by her editor Shirakawa Miyako looking down at her with not a single emotion in her eyes.

“M-Miya-chan…” Ayu’s face stiffened, too.

“Wh-What are you doing here?”

Yukari couldn’t follow at all. A radio wave detector—something a professional detective would use—couldn’t possibly be what she used. There were no listening or tracking devices attached to Yukari’s belongings or anywhere in the apartment, and Ayu’s phone had no suspicious apps installed on it. On top of that, Yukari made Ayu post a picture of the “Nokke Bowl” she had eaten on a trip to Aomori she had been on years ago. Sure, that would allow Miyako to figure out Yukari was on the run somewhere, but it would put her on the wrong track to Aomori. She even added a picture of the food ticket next to it to make it explicitly clear. Thanks to that, Miyako should have been heading in the opposite direction of Mie…and yet, she now stood in front of Yukari, who began to panic.

“The design on the food ticket in the picture was too old.”

“Wh-What did you say…?”

“That ‘Nokke Bowl’ from Aomori changed their design just recently, which is different from the ticket in the picture.”

“What?!”

“That’s how I knew this was all a trap you set up to send me in the wrong direction. You’ve gotten careless, Hikari.”

“Tsk! So how did you pinpoint our location…?!”

“Suhara Tomoka-chan told me.”

“What?”

Upon hearing an unexpected name, Yukari fell silent. Even Ayu raised a shocked voice.

“Ayu… Did you tell Tomoka-chan about us going to Ise?”

“I…I’m sorry…” Ayu apologized right away.

However, one doubt remained.

“But why do you think Tomoka-chan would know where we are?!”

“On the picture she uploaded on social media the other day, I recognized that the table the food was on was actually the same wood pattern as yours, so I figured she went over to your place to eat, and that’s how you got acquainted, right?”

“Th-The wood pattern…?!” Ayu stared at her cousin in disbelief.

“Also, why are you checking Tomoka-chan’s social media? Once the anime ended, you had no reason to be in touch with her, right? Are you actually her fan?”

“Say what now? It’s common practice to check all friendships and relationships, as well as all the people’s social media, for all of the authors you’re responsible for.”

Hearing all that made even Yukari feel slightly disgusted. But Miyako continued.

“So, two days after Tomoka-chan went to your place, she posted something about ‘I’m having a friend read all of Kairou Hikari-sensei’s works right now’ along with a picture of one of your novels, so I figured that this new friend might be Acchan. So when I realized that you were on the run, I contacted Tomoka-chan’s manager, who told me that this new friend was on a trip right now. That’s what led me here.”

When Miyako finished explaining her reasoning, Yukari slowly began clapping.

“I lost. Masterfully done, Mya-san.”

“Heh… So, you’ll be coming back to Tokyo and working on the manuscript?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“…This easily?” Miyako narrowed her eyes with a dubious look, but Yukari just smiled.

“I mean, the way you talked with that big smug like you were some detective was pretty funny, so I’m satisfied. I guess you can be a bit childish at times.”

“I-I wasn’t making any smug face at all!” Miyako screamed and panicked.

“I have to say, private detective Miya-chan was pretty cute.”

“Ugh…”

Being teased by Ayu made Miyako’s face turn even more red. And with that, this escape attempt ended in a resounding success, so Ayuki and Yukari headed back home with Miyako.

Chapter 6: Fasting Progresses Before the Deadline

After their return from Ise, right after they came back to Tokyo, Miyako remained with Yukari all night until she finished her manuscript. Two weeks passed. Another deadline had begun closing in on Yukari, but surprisingly enough, she worked on her manuscript and managed to finish it on the day of. That night, Yukari and Ayu sat at the dining table, along with Miyako who was in a great mood now that the manuscript had been finished on time. Since everybody had done a great job, the food was a bit more extravagant than usual.

“Your cooking is so good, Acchan… Isn’t this as good as the stuff you can order at a restaurant?” Miyako commented while munching on the lamb roti.

“You’re exaggerating, Miya-chan…” Ayu grew flustered.

“No, not at all,” commented Yukari as she cut some butter that was melting in the pot. “You were already pretty good when you came here, but your skills and repertoire have been growing so much.”

“That’s… Well, yes. I used to just cook food for the family, but I decided I might as well try some new dishes.”

“Oh? And how do you decide on which dish to try?” Miyako asked while taking a bite of Janssons frestelse.

“Usually, I just cook stuff Yukari-san says she’d like to try.”

Yukari stabbed the Poor Man’s Pasta and gave a smug smile.

“When I’m reading a cooking manga or watching a cooking show and say ‘Oh, this looks delicious,’ the food usually appears on the dinner table the next day.”

“Say what?! I’m actually so jealous right now!”

“Hee hee, right? It’s a dream come true for a cooking series fan like me. Also, she’s been making sweets, too. Like macarons, donuts, and apple pie.”

“Uugh… I can’t believe it… Acchan, let’s get married!”

Miyako’s request sounded genuine for once, which made Ayu blush.

“No can do. Ayu is my wife already,” countered Yukari, secretly grabbing Ayu’s hand under the table where Miyako couldn’t see.

Ayu glanced over at her and returned the grip.

“Also, don’t you have a boyfriend, Mya-san?”

“…I don’t wanna talk about that siscon bastard right now. Why the hell did he move out because his little sister is in her rebellious period?” She grumbled to herself and downed the rest of her glass of wine.

It seemed like Yukari had stepped on a massive landmine.

“W-Well, either way, I can’t let you have Ayu. The reason I made so much progress with the manuscript is because of Ayu cooking every single day.”

“Mhm… If you say that, then I can’t exactly take Acchan away from you, either…”

Ayu nodded along. “Yeah. Plus, I’d like to get even better at cooking for Yukari-san’s sake.”

Hearing that, Miyako flashed a wry smile.

“You two have gotten so close. I was a bit worried when I introduced you to Yukari though…”

“Hee hee…” Ayu smiled and strengthened her grip on Yukari’s hand.

But then, Miyako narrowed her eyes and looked at Yukari and Ayu.

“I have to say, you two…” She seemed hesitant to say it out loud.

—Did she realize what’s going on between us?

Yukari grew cautious of Miyako's next words. But what came out of Miyako's mouth surprised both of them.

"Have you two gained weight?"

""What?""

Yukari and Ayu voiced their shock in unison.

"Mya-san… What did you say just now? I couldn't quite catch that," Yukari pretended to not have heard anything.

"I'm saying you two have gotten fat."

"Why did you have to use harsher words the second time around?!"

Miyako ignored Yukari's protest.

"It's been what, three months since you came to Tokyo? I have to say, Acchan… Your physique definitely has… you know…"

"So she says, Ayu. You should be more careful."

"Not just Acchan. The same goes for you, Hikari."

"Wha… N-No, that should be impossible…" Yukari let go of Ayu's hand and looked over her way.

Ayu seemed flustered as she looked over Yukari's whole body. When they first met, Yukari's first impression of Ayu was that she was small but had big breasts. But now, she noticed that Ayu looked somewhat chubby. Yukari placed her hand on her stomach, squeezing it from above her clothes. Ayu did the same to her own stomach.

"…"

"…"

"…Ayu, have you checked your weight lately?"

"Not really… How about you, Yukari-san?"

"Neither have I…"

In fact, the two of them might have subconsciously tried to avert their gazes from reality. Yukari was always the type of person to eat a lot, even before Ayu came to her home, but she'd usually keep the portions small since she got tired of actually cooking and doing the dishes. When she was addicted to a game, there were times she didn't even eat anything at all for a whole day. However, when Ayu appeared, she got to eat three delicious dishes every day, she had occasional midnight snacks, and they even stuffed their stomachs full on trips. Not to mention the snacks Ayu would regularly make.

—*And since I'm not exercising, it's no surprise that I'd gain weight…*

Ayu's expression stiffened, too.

"Yeah, I feel like my clothes have been feeling tighter lately… And I did try tasting some of the dishes while cooking… and I ate all of the snacks I failed at… And I haven't done any exercise since coming here… Because back home, I had karate practice… and P.E. classes…"

"…Ayu, what do you say we go check our weight later? I don't have the courage to see those numbers myself, so…"

"Yes, that sounds good…" Ayu nodded gravely.

*

Ayu and Yukari returned from the bath, their expressions telling of the horrible results.

"Welcome back. How did it go?" Miyako asked as Yukari shoved the food her way.

"Mya-san… You can have the rest of my food…"

"Mine, too…"

"I can't eat three people's shares… Was it that bad?"

Ayu and Yukari nodded.

"I have to go on a diet…"

“Same here…”

“That’s fine and all, but don’t overdo it, okay? Maybe play some fitness games?”

Yukari shook her head.

“I don’t have the time to slowly work on losing weight. I wanna go to the pool in the summer. I wanna check out the festivals. I wanna enjoy all sorts of food on my next escape from the deadline… So I have to get rid of this fat as quickly as possible.”

“Maybe cut the escapes back a bit?” Miyako commented, but Yukari ignored her.

Ayu nodded in agreement to Yukari’s statement.

“I have to lose weight… But how can I do that quickly?”

“Maybe Tomoka-chan knows? She would probably know quick ways to lose weight. As an idol, she’s always gotta be careful of her weight, after all.”

“That’s true! I’ll ask her right away.”

Ayu took out her smartphone and sent Tomoka a LINE message.

Do you happen to know any quick methods to lose weight?

A response arrived almost instantly.

Forcing a diet on your body is not very good, sire. Eating well-balanced food while exercising is quite for the best.

I’m aware, but I need to know despite that, my liege.

I used a particular method last time I had a photoshoot and had to quickly lose weight…

Please tell me!

It’s pretty tough, so I don’t really recommend it.

No problem!

It appears you have made up your mind… Very well, give me a moment.

A few seconds later, Tomoka sent back a URL. When she tapped on it, Ayu was brought to a website. Appearing there was…

"…'Fasting Dojo: Lose Fat Playfully'…"

"F-Fasting…!"

They looked at each other, their expressions grave, and they both nodded.

*

Thus, Yukari and Ayu registered for this Fasting Dojo, and headed over to the actual location two days later. A fasting diet was an extreme type of diet with the philosophy that, as long as you don't eat, you will lose weight. Many people challenge it, but for amateurs and people who don't know better, it will only make things worse and harm your body and mind. And there is always a chance you'll only eat more from the stress.

However, if you fast efficiently and allow your stomach to get rest, you can train your body and soul, as well as avoid any aggressive eating in a moment of weakness. A specialist in this field appeared and formed this fasting dojo with a few of his colleagues who wanted to obtain the same skill. Since there were no other buildings near the dojo other than a hotel, and since the next city over was a whole bus ride away, you wouldn't fall for the temptation of going to a convenience store nearby to grab a snack.

Around noon, Yukari and Ayu arrived at the hotel and finished their check-in, placing their belongings in their room. It was a large room with a Western theme that had two beds. It also had a bath and a bathroom. There was no fridge in sight. The view of the trees and mountains outside, combined with the river running down, was quite the sight. After that, they headed down to the lobby and waited for the other participants to arrive. There were around twenty of them, all women since it was a female-only course. Their ages ranged from their twenties to forties, so Ayu was probably the youngest.

"…Yukari-san," Ayu said in a quiet voice.

“Yeah?”

“I’m… incredibly hungry right now.”

“Same here…”

Since they had been told to not eat anything in the morning, the most they had was water. After a moment of waiting, a woman with a great figure, who looked to be in her 30s, entered.

“Welcome, everyone. I will be your instructor for the next five days. My name is Sekiguchi. Let’s do our best to obtain truly healthy bodies,” she flashed a peaceful smile and then started explaining.

The camp would be a whole five days. The first two days were to get the body attuned to not eating much, and for the third and fourth days they wouldn’t eat anything at all. Since eating too much out of the blue after two days of nothing would be bad for the body, for the fifth day they would have breakfast and lunch in small amounts so that their bodies would get used to it. Of course, they were free to drink water whenever.

—I thought we were going to die without being able to eat for five days, but it’s just two. That’s not too bad, right? We’ll be fine…right?

Yukari touched her empty belly and felt slightly worried. They would get up at half past 6, and lights out was around half past 10 in the evening. Of course, there wasn’t any punishment if you didn’t follow those rules, but it was highly recommended so that your body could adjust and get rest. Other than doing some light gymnastics, there weren’t any plans for the day, so it was mostly a free schedule. There were some yoga and dance classes, and there were meetings for health and diet assistants. Additionally, there was a library room packed with manga and novels, a ping-pong table, a tennis court, a sports gym, and a large bath with an attached sauna. Other than food, you had no limitations on what you were allowed to bring with you, so you could use the WiFi to use the internet or play games. The room wasn’t half

bad, either, which would be perfect to relax in… Excluding the fact that you couldn't eat freely.

"Then let's have lunch."

The explanation ended, so Sekiguchi showed them to a cafeteria. The food there had already been prepared. There was assorted rice in a small bowl, as well as miso soup with barely any meat. A single bite of seaweed that could go down in one bite, along with carrot salad and slightly boiled cucumber with eggplant. On top of that, there was artificially sweetened juice where you could still see the yeast. It was the perfect example of a light breakfast, and since Yukari was used to a luxurious dinner, this was not nearly enough.

"Make sure to chew it properly, okay?" Sekiguchi said, so Yukari started eating.

Each of the dishes generally lacked the thick taste she was used to, but because she was starving, it didn't taste all that bad. She made sure to chew slowly as Sekiguchi instructed, and it even began tasting better the longer it continued. The homemade juice wasn't half bad, either.

"…This is actually pretty good," said Ayu next to her.

"That's true. Maybe we can actually manage this camp," Yukari said and smiled.

However, she soon realized how foolish she had been. They felt fulfilled and satisfied right after lunch, but there was no use hiding how little food they had eaten, so it didn't even take three hours until they felt hungry again. Dinner was scheduled for 7 pm, so they did their best to fill their empty stomachs with water and hold out until then. Other than their group, the rest of the participants for Fasting Dojo had already gathered, which was at least a hundred people, and you could see a few men here and there. They sat down at their table and gazed at the small amount of rice with thin miso soup in despair. The rest was the same as during their lunch.

"This is… brutal."

This was probably the most depressing dinner Yukari had ever experienced.

“Is this your first time at the Fasting Dojo?” Asked one of the women in the group of three sitting at the same table. All three of them looked like they were in their 40s, with plump and chubby bodies.

“Ah, yes…” Yukari nodded.

“The first time is bound to be the hardest. But it’s not so bad once you get used to it.”

“That’s right. This is actually my 20th time being here.”

—*So they suffered a rebound 20 whole times?*

Yukari was worried that this dojo might just be a huge scam.

“That’s amazing. You’re a true regular,” Yukari responded with a weak smile.

“Everyone comes here at least once every three months.”

“The moment I feel like I’ve gained a bit of weight, I come here to reset it all.”

“I… I see.”

Yukari wanted to call them insane but swallowed that comment.

“We’re all a mother friend group, so we always come together. What about you two?”

Ayu’s body quivered in fear at that question.

“We’re colleagues at work. I’m in university, and she’s in high school,” Yukari came up with a lie on the spot.

After that, their conversation with the group of moms continued, and Yukari chewed the food even more than during the afternoon, which took her a whole 30 minutes.

*

After dinner was done, Ayu checked out the lecture from the health and diet assistant. Yukari wasn't all that interested, so she just headed back to their room. The contents of the lecture reminded Ayu of the home ec class in school, but she had never listened much to that, so this was a great chance to learn. Ayu returned to the room after the 40-minute lecture, where she saw Yukari sitting at her laptop.

"Are you… actually working?"

"Well, I tried to work."

Except it seemed like she didn't make much progress with it.

"How was the lecture?"

"It was pretty interesting. And a bit nostalgic."

"Nostalgic?"

"Yes. Listening to a teacher explain things. It's been a while, you know."

Not too long ago, she was still a student, attending regular classes. She did have to leave her village because she got outed as a lesbian, but at the very least, she didn't dislike spending time with friends after school. What were her friends doing right now? Had they already forgotten about her? Or maybe they regretted their actions?

"Oh yeah, I didn't really hear much about you before you came to my place, Ayu," Yukari said.

"That's true. You've never asked much about my life before. Even though a stranger came to your house. Were you trying to be considerate?"

Yukari shook her head.

"Honestly, knowing that you're Mya-san's cousin was all I needed. And I wasn't really all that interested in you in the beginning."

"Well, how about now?" Ayu asked, looking directly into Yukari's eyes.

“…I want to know more. I’m curious what kind of life you’ve lived before coming here.”

“Then I’ll tell you.”

“Are you sure?” Yukari seemed somewhat hesitant to ask, but Ayu nodded.

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” she said and started telling Yukari about herself.

About her family, her environment, and the day she realized she was a lesbian. The fact that her classmates were grossed out because of her sexuality, the fact that her parents didn’t understand her, and that she eventually ran away from home. It didn’t take very long to explain all of the events. Ayu was quite shocked that her life could be summarized in such a brief time. The three months she had spent with Yukari so far felt much more fulfilling than the past 17 years of her own life.

“Sorry that it wasn’t very interesting…”

“That’s how these sorts of stories go,” Yukari couldn’t deny the fact that it wasn’t exciting. “But the fact that you caused a scene in the classroom and even ran away from home is very much like you. It’s aggressive… or is it eccentric? It’s very much like Mya-san.”

“Ugh…”

Granted, the other person may have deserved it, but Ayu still felt embarrassed at how far she went.

“But it was thanks to that we got to meet, right?” Yukari gently smiled. “Thanks for coming to Tokyo, Ayu.”

Upon hearing this, Ayu felt something warm growing in her chest.

“Yukari-san…!” Tears started flowing from her eyes as she leaped at Yukari.

She, in return, tightly embraced Ayu.

*

The following morning, at around half past 6 am, Yukari and Ayu woke up to the hotel-intern broadcast and headed to the multipurpose hall on empty stomachs, which made it hard to even walk. This is where the participants of the dojo would gather in the morning to do some light gymnastics. It wasn't anything outstanding, mostly just basic exercise you'd get in the early morning radio, but on empty stomachs, it did take a lot out of them. Plus, the plan was for them to go to sleep early, but Ayu and Yukari just spent the whole night flirting.

They somehow managed to survive the exercise and then headed to the cafeteria with the other participants. After sitting down at their designated table, they looked at today's breakfast. Since they were practically starving, they figured they'd be able to eat about anything. However…

"I can't do this anymore. I wanna go home…" Yukari let out a groan of weakness.

This morning's menu was—thin rice gruel that could just barely pass as rice porridge. Next to that, meatless miso soup and squeezed juice. That was all.

—*This is too cruel…*

They were being fed food that was made for the sick or the young, at most. They tasted the rice gruel several times to really indulge in the taste… However, the miso soup had lost most of its taste compared to the previous day.

“It’s not tasty at all… It hurts…”

“Don’t say that. It makes me want to cry myself…” Ayu said.

“Once I make it through this battle, I’ll go home and have my partner make the most delicious food in the world for me…”

“That’s a total death flag, isn’t it?”

“…What do you want to eat after we get home, Ayu?”

“Um… roast beef, ramen, monjayaki, rainbow trout, shaved ice… lobster…”

Yukari wanted to comment that they just had lobster the other day, but she held her tongue. Right now, all they could do was swallow their desires and hunger so that they could eat delicious food again.

*

The lunch looked the exact same, too. In the evening, the miso soup vanished completely. Ayu listened to another lecture from the diet expert and then returned to her room. Yukari was rolling around on the bed, playing mobile games.

“Welcome back!” Yukari stopped playing and pushed herself up. “No food at all tomorrow, huh?”

“It seems like it.”

“I’m not all that hungry, really. How about you, Ayu?”

“I’m doing just fine,” Ayu nodded.

They both weren’t acting tough, they hadn’t been feeling that hungry since lunch that day.

“…It feels kind of weird, you know? When I saw dinner today, I never thought it would fill me up,” said Yukari.

“Whenever you feel hungry and your blood sugar goes down, your body sends signals to your brain that it needs to preserve energy.”

“Oh, really?”

“So if you continue to eat while not raising your blood sugar and keeping it at a stable level, your brain doesn’t send those signals and you don’t feel hungry anymore.”

“You sure know a lot, Ayu.”

“They talked about it in the lecture earlier.”

Yukari let out a snicker.

“Well, I knew about that since I looked up some of the mechanisms of the human body before coming here.”

“Huh?! Then why didn’t you say anything?!”

“Because that confident face of yours while explaining was pretty cute,” said Yukari with a teasing smirk.

Ayu blushed.

“Geez… Anyway, if you’re not hungry, why don’t you get some work done?”

“This is a totally different thing. My main motivation when the deadline was coming up was delicious food. Now I’ve been dragged down into the pits of hell, so how could I force myself to work?”

“Hngh…”

Ayu didn’t have anything to say to that. Since Ayu never worked—excluding doing the housework for Yukari, but that didn’t really count—she couldn’t pretend like she knew what Yukari felt. And motivation was definitely important.

“Then… At least work on it once we get back, okay? I’ll be sure to make more food for you.”

“Okaaay,” Yukari delivered a somewhat lackluster response.

*

The third day, after their morning radio exercise was done, they gulped down their juice. The food for lunch was limited to juice, and the same was the case for the evening. Since the juice was artificially sweetened, the calories were low. Not eating anything and just living off zero-calorie juice was a new experience for Ayu. However, she felt a lot better than the previous day, when she almost died from starvation. In the morning, she attended the yoga classes by herself and then watched a movie with Yukari in the afternoon. At night, she received a message from Tomoka asking how she was doing.

Just fine.

For real?!

Tomoka responded immediately.

I almost died from starvation and solitude on the second day!

Well, I've got Yukari-san with me.

Ah, yeah… When I went, I only had random old women with me!

Yeah, if Yukari wasn't around, Ayu might have not made it this far.

When I go to the Fasting Dojo the next time, will you come with me?

No way.

Sadge.

The fourth day was roughly the same as the third. They had their juice and water and went hiking with the ladies from their table. In the afternoon, Ayu worked on reading more of Yukari's novel. She didn't feel hungry anymore, so she felt a lot better than on her first day. In fact, she felt lighter than before. And then, the fifth day arrived. After two days of no eating, they headed inside the cafeteria after finishing their daily exercise. The tables were stacked with rice gruel, meatless miso soup, boiled cucumber, and their trusted juice. It was too sad to even call breakfast, but Ayu couldn't stop herself from drooling.

“T-Time to dig in…” Ayu scooped up some rice gruel with the spoon and carried it to her mouth. “Wha…”

She was surprised by the strong saltiness of the rice, forcing her to let out a shocked voice. Yukari shared a similar reaction.

“Is the rice gruel really this flavorful?”

“That is actually the same rice gruel as the second day,” said an elderly lady at the same table.

“Your tongues are just extremely sensitive now.”

“Really?”

Ayu then reached for the miso soup. The color was faint, showing that it was the same as when they last had it. But when she took a sip…

“It’s so delicious…”

Contrary to the first and second days, when they felt like the miso soup had no taste at all, it was now brimming with flavor.

“After you’re done fasting, everything tastes better. This is one of the joys to look forward to when coming here.”

“That’s absolutely right. After everything you’ve been through, this food tastes even better than a dish at a popular restaurant.”

A few days ago, Ayu would have doubted that statement, but now that she was sitting here, she felt like she understood what this was about. After they finished eating, they spent some time taking baths and playing table tennis, then ate more of the same food for lunch, except it was actual rice porridge with some meat in the soup, as well as cold lettuce. This would be the final meal for this camp, so all that was left was to head home. Despite this meal not having much to offer, they took their time to chew on every bite.

*

Finally, after five whole days, Yukari and Ayu headed back home. They went to the bath and checked their body weight, realizing that their diet had succeeded.

“Be sure to not eat anything too heavy for dinner and the whole day tomorrow,” said the instructor before they left, so Ayu worked on a menu that took into consideration everything she had learned during the lectures. It was the most simple of dishes since she had come to Yukari’s place, but they were both satisfied by it. From then on, they spent the next three days doing easy exercise and not overdoing it with their food.

In the evening, Miyako said she had some work in the area and decided to show up. Glancing at the two of them, she commented “You two sure slimmed down, huh?”

“Yes. The fasting diet was a complete success.”

“So it actually works… Maybe I should check it out myself if I ever gain too much weight.”

“Miya-chan, do you want to eat dinner with us?”

“Really? Then don’t mind if I do,” Miyako nodded happily.

And after she took a bite from the dinner, her face distorted like it didn’t fit her taste.

“Acchan, isn’t this a bit too… lacking in flavor?”

“Really?”

“You think so?”

Both Yukari and Ayu decided to get a taste as well, but even though it had barely used any seasoning, it was tasty to them.

“This much is just fine, Mya-san. If you chew carefully enough, you’ll get to taste the vegetables much better.”

“The taste of the vegetables…? I can’t believe I would hear those words out of your mouth,” Miyako said, her expression looking almost terrified.

Throughout the rest of that dinner, her reaction did not change. The next day, and the day after—even until a week later. Yukari managed to finish her work in time twice before the deadline, so she headed on a date with Ayu. They walked around buying clothes and other goods in Harajuku and then decided to eat lunch. Since most of the stores with healthy food around them were packed, they decided to go to a hamburger shop.

“Hee hee… I’d rather not eat hamburgers again, but I guess it won’t hurt once in a while, right?”

“That’s true. I don’t feel like eating meat, but it’s better than nothing.”

They sat down at a table after ordering their food, opened up the wrappings, and then took a bite—

“…Mh!”

“Mmn?!”

They hadn’t gotten to taste something so rich in flavor at all lately. It was almost overstimulating. The ultimate taste of oil and spice left any healthy and naive thoughts in the dust. Sugar and protein were the strongest, the apex of the cooking world. If this was a cooking manga, their clothes might have been blown off.

“I’m sorry for saying I didn’t want to eat hamburgers…”

“Meat… Delicious… thick sauce… the best…”

Once they were done eating, they both had expressions of pure bliss. After that, their cooking routine returned to usual, but since they didn’t want to suffer through more fasting, they kept the calories to a low amount and continued doing their daily exercise.

Chapter 7: An Idol Voice Actress' Live Concert Progresses Before the Deadline

On August 11th, I have a live concert near your home. Would you like to come to check it out with Ayu-san?

Around the start of August, Suhara Tomoka sent this message to Yukari's smartphone.

"Hey, Ayu? I got an invitation from Tomoka-chan to see her live concert. Wanna go?" Yukari asked.

"Wait, a live concert? Yes, please!" Ayu's eyes lit up in joy.

"Did you often go to concerts back home, Ayu?"

"Not once. Though I'd often watch recordings and videos."

"Oh? What kind of music do you like?"

Ayu hesitated for a moment.

"Well… I usually like music that's a bit more aggressive. Stuff that will help with stress when you listen to it…"

"Like rock?"

"Um… something more metal, I guess? Death metal, actually. The type where the music videos are a gorefest…"

"I see…"

Considering how thorough and careful Ayu was whenever housework was involved, this kind of taste was definitely a surprise. Then again, her blonde hair and red-mesh outfit that gave her punk vibes kind of also made this expected in a way.

“Tomoka-chan’s songs usually are more upbeat and cute in nature. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course. I’ve been listening to her songs lately, so I’m okay.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Do you go to live concerts often, Yukari-san?”

“I went to watch one of Tomoka-chan’s. When I looked after Sarubobo-chan and she was on tour, I went to the one in Tokyo. That’s pretty much all of the anime song concerts I’ve been to. I did go to a lot of classic concerts with my family, and I checked out a good number of game-related orchestra concerts. I like opera and that sort of thing, too.”

“As expected of rich people, I guess…”

Yukari smiled.

“Once you actually check it out, you realize it’s not that crazy of a deal. Even newcomers to the scene will enjoy it, and the impact will be enough to ensure you enjoy yourself.”

“Is that how that works?”

“Yes. Let’s check out all sorts of things.”

“Of course. I’d love to go to a death metal live concert.”

“Actually, I’m not sure I’ll be able to handle that…” Yukari showed a somewhat tense expression. “But either way, I should respond to Tomoka-chan first.”

Yukari sent Tomoka a brief “We’re coming~” message.

Thank you very much! Then I’ll prepare some seats for you. The set list has Pride of the Underdog in it, so I’ll do my best to perform it!

Pride of the Underdog was the opening song for the anime of Yukari’s novel that Tomoka voiced a character in, which she also performed. It had some references to the original novel, and Yukari was quite a fan of it. She

remembered Tomoka singing it at a previous concert, and it rather moved her. Being able to hear it live was even better. Thanks to that, Yukari looked forward to the concert even more.

*

On August 11th, the day of Suhara Tomoka's live concert was close to starting, Ayu and Yukari headed to the venue. The concert would be held at a multipurpose arena around ten minutes away by foot from Yukari's apartment. Rather than live events like these, it was more frequently used for sports events, and it was equipped with an indoor pool and gym. Yukari had used these several times before, but she had never entered the actual arena. They arrived roughly 15 minutes before the start of the concert, with the line extending even outside the building.

"Wow, there's so many people…"

"The capacity of the arena is up to around 10,000 people, so that's probably it. Tomoka-chan's live concerts are usually packed."

Yukari's answer left Ayu bewildered.

"10,000?"

If Ayu had to sing in front of that many people, she might just die from the pressure. Ayu followed Yukari, who was walking past the long line.

"Aren't we going to wait in line?"

"We've got special tickets, so it's fine."

"Special tickets?" Ayu followed along until they reached a door with a sign that read *Special/Staff*, where a staff member was standing. The automatic door was a reception area with around ten people lined up. After waiting for a moment, their turn arrived.

"We're Kairou Hikari and Shirakawa Ayu," Yukari told the staff.

The staff then checked through a list.

“Um… Kairou-sama and Shirakawa-sama, yes.” The staff said and opened the door. “Also, take these,” the person said and handed the two stickers that read ‘Guest’ to put on their clothes.

With that done, they passed the reception area.

“Here you go. Put this on so that people can see it, yeah?” Yukari handed Ayu a ticket and a sticker, and then she put one on her own shoulder.

Ayu did the same. They walked down the hallway, went up a set of stairs, and stepped out onto the audience seats, searching for their reserved seats. They found them on the stands to the north on the first floor, which was in the center of the side to the left of the stage. It was a bit further away from the stage but allowed a good view of it.

“I haven’t been able to enjoy this treatment in a while, but not having to wait in line is a blessing,” said Yukari.

All the people around them were people wearing suits or were beautiful people who could pass for models. Some of them seemed like they could be fans from overseas, too.

“Have all the people here been invited directly by Tomoka-san?”

“Some. Others are friends of the agency or recording companies. That person over there is probably a voice actress. I think I’ve seen her before.”

“Oh, wow…”

Ayu really began to wonder if an average person like her should really be amongst a group of amazing people like them. Shortly after they reached their seats, the entire arena opened for regular visitors. It didn’t take long for the rest of the seats to be filled, which made Ayu a bit out of sorts.

“I suddenly feel so nervous.”

“I get that. You’re not even the one who’s gonna stand on the stage, and yet there’s this tension in the air that sucks you in,” Yukari laughed and agreed, which made Ayu happy.

They waited in anticipation, and it didn’t take long for the show to start. The announcer asked the audience to not take any pictures or videos, and then the lights turned off. The area was shrouded in darkness… only for the lights to suddenly turn on the stage and vibrant music to start. Standing in the center of the spotlights was Suhara Tomoka. The moment she became visible, cheers filled the crowd. She waved at everyone with a bright smile and started singing. The way she confidently presented herself made her worthy of being a star, and she almost felt like a different person compared to the girl geeking out about Yukari’s works.

*

The performance lasted two hours, full of singing, dancing, screaming, teasing, and talking, as well as several costume changes to the point where Tomoka was drenched in sweat, yet she continued to smile as brightly as in the beginning. Once it was over, she disappeared behind the stage, the lights in the area turned dark, but the crowd continued to cheer. Ayu did the same, her eyes sparkling.

“That was a great concert, wasn’t it?”

“It was amazing!” Ayu nodded and continued. “But it was a bit of a shame that I couldn’t join the others down in front of the stage.”

“Well, that’s the drawback to having these special seats.”

Generally, the people in the special seats would just watch the performance in silence. There was no way anybody would jump around and sing along when nobody around you did.

“By the way, how long do we continue cheering?” asked Ayu.

“There’s usually an encore right after.”

“Huh?! It’s not done yet?!” Ayu was excited.

“If that was the end, the announcer would have said so. There are even times when there’s a second encore right after the first. And those are mostly part of the original setlist anyway.”

“Oh, I had no idea.”

The applause continued for around ten minutes until the stage lit up again. Immediately after, Tomoka came back running on the stage. However, unlike her previous outfit, she was now wearing a simple short-sleeve T-shirt and shorts.

‘Everyoneee?! Are you still excited?!’

Tomoka screamed as she was showered in cheers, which made the audience scream even more. After that, the band started playing—The Pride of the Underdog. It was the same song Tomoka said would be part of the setlist.

“That song was made for the anime to your novel, right?” Ayu moved closer to Yukari and asked.

“You knew?”

“Ah, yes.”

As she listened to the song, especially live, the memories of back when the anime aired came rushing back to Yukari. Granted, she wasn’t exactly satisfied with the way the anime turned out, but she was excited to see people talking about it on social media. Compared to the last part of the concert, Tomoka’s voice and volume were even louder, shaking Yukari’s body in excitement. It was thanks to this song that she had found the energy to try and improve the source material even further… Although she might forget about these feelings the second she got home.

When the song finished, more cheers and applause filled the venue. Even Ayu’s face was red as she frantically clapped. The sight of her warmed Yukari’s heart, so she did the same. Tomoka bowed to all her fans until the applause calmed down. She then raised her head.

‘And so, this has been [Pride of the Underdog]. It was the opening theme for the anime version of one of my favorite novel series, so I really poured my heart and soul into it. What did you think?’

Tomoka directed the microphone at the audience, as people screamed things like “The best!” or “It was awesome!” Yukari also mumbled a faint “Amazing.” under her breath.

‘Thank you!’ Tomoka smiled. ‘Before we move on to the next song, there’s something I’d like to talk about,’

“What is it?” The audience screamed.

Tomoka swallowed her breath, audibly, like she had mentally prepared herself. She then continued to talk.

‘I like girls.’

The audience laughed.

“We know that!”

Tomoka then let out a faint snicker.

‘I am a woman, but I like women. I’m what you would call a lesbian.’

This time, no laughter followed. Yukari was bewildered by this sudden coming out, looking over at Ayu. She had a similar reaction, but her expression was different from Yukari’s or the rest of the audience. Tomoka then continued with a cheerful tone, as if she wanted to disperse the tense air in the venue.

‘Well, my family and the staff from my agency already know, so it’s not like I felt particularly hurt or excluded. Plus, I get to be all lovey-dovey with cute girls, so it’s more like a bonus for me. But I realize I’m the exception. In this world, even amongst some of you, there might be those who suffered bullying or discrimination just because of your sexual orientation. You probably couldn’t even tell a soul about it, too. And so, I was hoping that maybe, knowing there were people like me who share those same feelings, I

wanted to give you this confession. Thank you for listening to me.’ Tomoka gave a slight bow as the venue sent her another wave of applause.

Yukari glanced over at Ayu. She stared at Tomoka as large tears rolled down her cheeks. When she saw that, Yukari felt a sharp pain in her chest. In reality, Yukari couldn’t possibly understand what those tears meant, and what she felt at that moment. She could kiss Ayu, embrace her, and indulge in all sorts of pleasure, but she could never truly feel the same way. And this realization hurt her incredibly. After the applause calmed down, Tomoka raised her head as the band started playing.

‘All right, on to the next song!’

The second song of the encore was an energetic and ecstatic song. With cheers from the audience, the air in the venue returned to how it had been before Tomoka’s announcement. However, Ayu continued to stare at Tomoka, teary-eyed, like her whole being had been entranced by her. The second encore song was followed by a third, and Tomoka left the stage again. Ayu had stopped crying and began clapping furiously. Yukari did the same, and Tomoka returned to the stage once again after a few minutes. She was wearing a white dress with lily patterns, which looked like a wedding dress of sorts. The second encore also ended, and Tomoka got off the stage while waving her hand. The lights turned off, the audience seats lit up, and everyone understood that the concert was over. An announcement played saying so.

“All right, let’s go home,” Yukari stood up as she called out to Ayu, who stayed seated.

Normally, it was common practice to meet up with the artist who invited you to eat dinner or at least go see them, but Yukari decided to go straight home. For some reason, she didn’t want Ayu to meet Tomoka right now. And since she didn’t even think of seeing Tomoka, she just nodded and stood up. Yukari then sent Tomoka a LINE message.

‘That was great! Thanks for inviting us! I gotta get home because of my deadline, but we’ll meet again soon.’

She then walked out of the arena quickly, as if she wanted to run away. However, the part about her deadline wasn’t a lie. In fact, this very deadline was for that very evening. The path to the train station was packed with people from the concert, but Yukari lived in the opposite direction, she didn’t have much trouble. On the way, she and Ayu talked.

“Tomoka-chan sure is amazing, right?”

“She’s incredible,” Ayu nodded with red cheeks.

“Hey, Ayu?”

“Yes?”

“Did you know that… well… Tomoka-chan is into girls?”

Ayu momentarily stopped in her tracks, so Yukari turned around to her.

“Yes, I did.”

—*As I thought…*

The reason the two immediately hit it off despite only having met once wasn’t because they were close in terms of age, but because they had the same sexuality.

“And I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

Ayu’s sudden apology threw Yukari for a loop.

“…I told Tomoka-chan that we’re dating.”

“…I see. What did she say?”

Ayu hesitated for a moment.

“…That she would be a better partner.”

“R-Really? I see…”

Yukari was painfully aware of how much she was shaken. After all… That was absolutely right. Someone with the same sexuality as Ayu, as well as being closer in age, would be much better as **Ayu’s girlfriend**. It’d at least be a lot more natural than having formed this romantic relationship just to keep Ayu close to her, as Yukari did. Maybe inviting them to the live concert today and witnessing her coming out was Tomoka’s way of declaring this very fact to Yukari.

—*What to do…*

During the live concert, Tomoka looked like she was shining bright. Comparing that to some good-for-nothing author like herself, Yukari would just lose.

“Yukari-san?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Still, she’d be more worthy, huh…?”

Having her name called by Ayu with a slightly worried tone, Yukari just played it off and rushed back home without looking back.

*

When they got home, Ayu immediately checked social media and the news. Even though it had barely been an hour since the end of the live concert, Tomoka’s coming out had already spread like wildfire. Although the reaction during the live concert was positive, the same couldn’t be said online. Some fans were supportive with ‘Whatever sexuality she may have, I’ll support her’ but others said ‘I was actually in love, so this hurts.’ Some supported Tomoka with ‘So all the business yuri was real yuri?! Hell yeah!’ while also seeing Tomoka as more like an object than a person. Some fans wanted the best for Tomoka’s career and said ‘I don’t know if this kind of talk will be helpful for her career, so I feel like she should keep that sort of thing to herself.’ A few with the same sexuality said ‘It gave me courage’ or ‘I didn’t even know her all that well, but now I’m going to support her’ but others judged her, assuming that she was wanting pity points.

Some saw her whole argument of being able to flirt with colleagues as another way to sully the image of gay people, but others were happy that Tomoka had been open about her sexuality, that she was showing that a happy life is possible no matter how you feel. Personally, Ayu was between the two. Being able to live your life freely and without having to worry is a good thing, but as a single girl, there was also a level of scariness about being seen as a target of affection by random people. Generally, the responses were positive and humane, but there were outcasts who called it gross or told Tomoka to keep it to herself. Some insults even crossed the line so much that

the comments were deleted by the websites, but just reading it all made Ayu sick to the stomach. Either way, this whole incident would surely not cool down anytime soon, considering the waves it had created.

—*Tomoka-san sure is amazing…*

So much so that Ayu could only sigh. In the end, she really lived in a different world from her. And right as she was thinking about that, her phone vibrated. It turned out to be the same person she was just thinking about—Suhara Tomoka.

“H-Hello?!”

‘Yooo. How was the concert?’

Tomoka was as nonchalant as ever.

“It was… yeah, amazing of course.”

‘I’m glad to hear it. I wanted to hear your thoughts immediately after, but Sensei said she had urgent work to do.’

Ayu didn’t consider the possibility of meeting her backstage.

“Ah, yeah. Sorry… Also, can you really afford to be on the phone right now?”

‘I just finished talking to the other folks and I’m taking off my makeup right now, so I’ve got time.’

“That’s not what I meant… With what you said and all that.”

‘Ah, you mean my confession? It sure seems crazy. Though I haven’t looked it up much online yet.’

“I… don’t think you should, either.”

‘Ah, I guess people are saying crap again? Well, I’m used to it, so it’s fine.’

“I… see…”

Ayu once again had to respect Tomoka for how strong of a person she was.

“The reason you said all that today… Was that for my sake?” Ayu asked, hesitantly.

‘Well, that’s part of it. But I eventually wanted to come clean about it anyway. My plan was to use that to win over Kairou-sensei, though.’

“O-Oh… Well I’m sorry…”

‘An apology isn’t what I want. Plus, I don’t regret it, either,’ Tomoka said without much remorse.

“Do you… still like Yukari-san?”

A brief pause followed.

‘I do.’

“…”

‘Ah, but don’t worry! I’m not trying to steal her from you! Stealing a friend’s lover doesn’t even work out in fiction! And I’m against NTR!’

Ayu wondered what this “NTR” thing was.

“Well I… think you’d be a better partner for her.”

A faint murmur left Ayu’s mouth. Luckily, Tomoka didn’t hear.

‘Huh? What did you say?’

“N-Nothing.”

‘Ah, really? Sorry, my manager is calling for me, so I’ve gotta go. Talk to you later.’

“Y-Yeah, see you.”

‘Bye.’

The phone call ended. But Ayu continued to stare at her phone screen for a while longer.

Chapter 8: The Decision Progresses Before the Deadline

“Hiiikaaariii!”

The following morning after Suhara Tomoka’s concert, Shirakawa Miyako arrived at Yukari’s place with the face of a demon. Apparently, she had been waiting for the new manuscript at the editorial department the whole night, because her clothes and hair were messy.

“You… piece of garbage trash useless author! I thought you might have changed after the previous deadline was on time!”

Yukari’s eyes shot wide open, since she was on the other end of Miyako’s rage.

“Huh?! So the deadline of the 11th was… for the Gregorian Calendar?!”

“Excuse me?” Miyako raised one eyebrow, but Yukari continued.

“I’m sorry, I thought we were going with the old lunisolar calendar! But since you never clarified, I feel like you’re partially to blame, Mya-san!”

Miyako’s face twitched.

“I… I’ve never heard such an absurd excuse in my life. Who would even use the lunisolar calendar in modern Japan?”

“Maybe someone from the church?”

“No they don’t!” Miyako retorted without hesitation. “So what about the manuscript?”

“I just finished it earlier. I’m reading through it right now.”

Miyako sighed in relief.

“So I guess we’ll make it in time. Print it out as soon as you’re done. I’ll get right to checking it over.”

“Okaaay…” Yukari gave a lukewarm response and was about to head back to her office.

“Oh yeah, I met Takatomi-san yesterday at an editorial meeting.”

“…!”

When that name popped up, Yukari’s face tensed up.

“R-Really? So she’s back to work?”

“Um… Who is Takatomi-san?” Ayu asked while cleaning the living room.

“My former editor,” Yukari responded with a stiff expression.

“Huh? So Miya-chan wasn’t your editor from the start?”

Upon hearing that, Yukari felt a bit sad. She really didn’t know anything about novels or publishers.

“My debut work didn’t win the award at Mya-san’s Brunch Hill publisher, see. It was at a different publisher, where Takatomi-san was my editor.”

Takatomi Shizuka—That is the name of Yukari’s very first editor. Yukari’s first novel debuted under the Gift Publisher’s GF Bunko Editorial Department, where Shizuka was a new editor herself. Apparently, she had read “Search of the Heart” and passionately pushed it forward in the selection process.

—You have talent! I can tell! So let’s work together and create something that will truly change the world!

When they first met, that was what she said right after introducing herself. Yukari didn’t consider her novel anything special, and she felt rather awkward receiving so much passion from Takatomi’s voice and gaze, so she could only give a vague response. Yukari didn’t have any intention of changing the world with something she wrote, not compared to a driven

editor like her. As a result, they didn't get along at first, butting heads most of the time until Takatomi felt angry at Yukari because she didn't even try, and Yukari started to avoid Takatomi since she kept saying things like "This novel can be even better!"

Yukari had only heard about this after the fact since she was barely involved with all the adaptations, but Takatomi would often fight with the people responsible for the movie and manga adaptations of Yukari's novels, until she eventually took a break from work because of the stress. After that, Yukari received a new editor, who didn't work out either, so she consulted her contact Shirakawa Miyako from Brunch Hill and eventually moved to that publisher herself since Takatomi still wasn't coming back. Yukari didn't think she had done anything wrong, but there was no doubt that she was one of the reasons Takatomi got pushed this far, so it turned into a bit of a trauma.

"…How was she doing?"

"Hmm, I haven't known her before she took time off work, but she didn't seem all too passionate and self-conscious like you said she was."

"I see."

Maybe the sickness got to her after all. But since this mostly resulted from her passion for her work, it was hard to tell if that was a good or bad thing.

"Did she… say anything about me?" Yukari carefully asked.

Miyako seemed hesitant.

"She did."

"What was it?"

"…Do you really want to know?"

"Well… I guess." Miyako averted her gaze from Yukari. "It seems like she's been reading your stuff since you went to Brunch Hill. She said that 'She's become quite a boring author'."

"…"

Yukari’s face stiffened, so Miyako tried to provide a follow-up.

“W-Well, those are just her words! I like your stuff! The same goes for the work I’m responsible for.”

“I know.”

Yukari wasn’t particularly angry at Takatomi’s words, but she was bewildered that she felt so shocked at her former editor’s opinion. She was aiming to write novels that weren’t anything special. Something you could read, enjoy, and then forget a day later. She should be happy that she achieved her goal, and yet…

“…Mya-san, be honest with me.”

“About what?”

“Compared to my previous works, how am I doing right now?”

Miyako went silent for a brief moment.

“Your works are definitely interesting right now. But… compared to “Search for the Heart” and your older series… The amazed feeling I got is missing.”

“Is that so…?”

Yukari was shocked at the fact these words hurt her so much.

“Th-That’s not a bad thing, okay! Your novels are easier to read and more usable for adaptations, so from a business perspective, that’s perfectly fine.”

“…”

More usable for adaptations… If you think about it, the quality is so lukewarm that it can be easily reproduced in other formats. In other words, it’s not “special.” Even though she had wanted to get rid of this “special” element, she was now desperately trying to get it back. That was probably because she had just seen Tomoka’s life the previous day. When she witnessed her sparkle like that, she didn’t want to lose. If Yukari herself can’t

become someone special, she might lose Ayu eventually. It was odd to think she'd never felt so panicked before meeting Ayu.

"Mya-san."

"Yeah?"

"Once I finish my next manuscript, can I take a break from my other series?"

"Huh?! There's no way we could do that!"

"Please."

Yukari's gaze was genuine, and Miyako understood.

"What's your reasoning?"

"I want to write a new novel."

"A new novel?"

"I think… I'd like to give it my all for once."

Miyako gave Yukari a close look.

"…I can't decide that on my own, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you very much!" Yukari thanked the girl and headed back to her office to continue working.

*

“…Acchan.”

After Yukari returned to her office, Miyako called out to Ayu, who had been cleaning the living room.

“What’s up?”

“Can we talk for a moment?”

Ayu was bewildered by Miyako’s serious tone and sat down to face her. Miyako looked at Ayu with a serious expression and spoke up.

“I know it might be weird to bring this up right when Hikari feels motivated… But next weekend, the 18th, I’m going home to Grandma and the others. How about you come with me?”

“…!”

Ayu’s expression stiffened. Miyako’s father and her own father were brothers, and their family home (the one owned by their grandparents) was in Ehime. It was practice for the Shirakawa Family to meet up there every year for Obon and New Year’s. Generally, all their relatives except Miyako’s father lived in Ehime. Miyako’s father went to Tokyo when he was young, got married, and started his family. For that reason, her family was a bit special amongst their relatives, but part of Ayu always wished she’d been born into their family instead. Either way, going with Miyako’s family back home to Ehime was the same as going back to her own family.

“I’m not going!” Ayu declared without hesitation.

Miyako continued with a blunt tone.

“Your mother called me the other day.”

“…”

She said she’s worried about you.”

“That’s a lie. She’s just worried about her image. Summer break’s going to end soon, too,” Ayu didn’t even sugarcoat her words, invoking a troubled expression from Miyako.

“Well, that’s part of it. But… she did tell me why you ran away from home.”

“…! So, you know… about me?”

Miyako nodded. In response, Ayu’s expression distorted into something of terror, sadness, and shame.

“Calm down, Acchan. I would never hate you for it. Believe me, please. Honestly, I have friends like you, so I’m honestly used to it.”

—I can confidently say that Mya-san wouldn’t ever push you away just because of your sexuality.

Yukari seemed to have been right after all. This allowed Ayu to calm down a bit.

“It’s been three months since you came to Tokyo, right? Even if you continue to live here, you should at least talk to your parents once.”

What Miyako said was absolutely right. Ayu was prepared to never return when she stormed out of her home, but legally speaking, her parents were still her legal guardians, and she was still a student at her high school. In order to put an end to her previous life, she should return home once. Plus… Tomoka’s coming out still remained in her mind. Surely, amongst those thousands of people, there must be a few people who felt the same way as Ayu. Tomoka faced the whole world with her confession, so talking to her parents wasn’t anything to be afraid of… Well, she was utterly terrified, but if she couldn’t overcome that, she wouldn’t be able to properly go out with Yukari while Tomoka was in the picture.

“…All right, I’ll come with you.”

Ayu made up her mind and declared so.

*

Yukari finished her manuscript and returned to the living room, where Miyako was working on her laptop, and Ayu sat at the table with her. It was an odd sight to see Ayu just sitting around. Yukari felt like something wasn't quite right but moved on.

"Mya-san, I'm done," she said and handed Miyako the printed manuscript.

"Good work," Miyako said and accepted it. "Regarding your new series, I talked to the boss and the online assistant. You can have a month off of your other series. Is that good with you?"

Currently, Yukari was working on two series. Since both series were pushed back for a month, she had time for one extra month.

"You sure work fast, Mya-san."

"Just to let you know, but this is the limit. Finish your new novel in a month, because we can't delay the other series. Got it?"

"Leave it to me," Yukari nodded.

Miyako faintly smiled and began checking over the manuscript.

"Um, Yukari-san?" Ayu said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going back home with Miya-chan next week."

"Wha…"

Yukari was shocked, considering what Ayu had been through.

"I'll talk to my parents and ask for them to let me stay here in Tokyo."

"…Okay, good luck."

Yukari was worried, but decided to respect Ayu's determination.

Chapter 9: A Regular Love Story of Two People Who Were Alone Until They Aren’t Anymore Progress Right Before the Deadline

On August 18th, just as planned, Ayu left Yukari’s flat together with Miyako.

“I’ll try to come home as soon as possible, but take care of yourself until then, okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m used to living by myself. And what about you? Isn’t this your first time flying a plane? You have your passport, right?”

“Why would I need a passport if I’m flying nationally?” Ayu retorted, but Yukari gave a shocked reaction.

“Huh? Did you not hear about the flight laws that changed this February? If you’re going from Honshu to Shikoku, Kyushu, or Okinawa, you need a passport.”

“What?! F-Flight laws?”

Ayu was taken aback, but since she was crossing a body of water, it might make sense that you’d need a passport for some degree of—

“Yeah, yeah. Enough of the jokes, let’s go,” Miyako flashed a wry smile, making Ayu realize she was just being played.

“Ugh… I can’t believe it.”

“Hee hee, you’re as gullible as ever.”

After being seen off by a smiling Yukari they headed for Haneda Airport. Since Miyako was busy with Comiket and other work, her return home to their main family was late, and since her parents weren’t exactly good with family meetings either, they delayed their return as well. Miyako’s mother was born and raised in Tokyo, a beauty just like Miyako herself. Her father,

however, had similar looks to his brother, Ayu's father, but he always wore stylish clothes that suited his age.

Both of them were surprised to see Ayu with her blonde hair and punk fashion but didn't comment much on it and instead just asked how she was doing. Surely they must have heard about Ayu having run away, but they didn't bring it up. They were probably drawing a clear line between themselves and her situation so as to not make things awkward between them or to make things worse for Ayu. She was genuinely jealous of Miyako for having such great parents.

The plane journey took an hour and a half after they departed from Haneda Airport, and they landed at Matsuyama Airport in Ehime prefecture. Ayu was a bit excited, since this was her first journey by plane, but by the time she stepped out of the airport, she was already feeling melancholic again. They rode the train from the airport to Matsuyama station.

"…Should I come with you?" Miyako showed concern and offered, but Ayu declined.

She had to face her parents herself or she'd never get over it. As Miyako and her parents headed off to their grandparents' home, Ayu took the train in the opposite direction. Upon reaching the nearest train station, she texted her mother 'Just got to the station' and walked on her way.

—I'm not going home. I'm going to face them so I can go back.

The place she would be going home to was Yukari's apartment in Tokyo. The sun scorched the asphalt below Ayu as she walked down the road for about 15 minutes. It was a 20-year-old building with a garden and a gate. This was the home Ayu had lived in for the past 16 years. She stood in front of the home, but since she hadn't brought a key with her, she'd have to ring the doorbell. Immediately after she did, Ayu's mother appeared.

"Wh-What are you wearing?!"

Before Ayu could even say anything, her mother was already half-reprimanding her. That was the first thing she said after three months of not seeing each other? Ayu felt a bit dizzy at that. Ayu just glared back at her mother without saying a word, which caused her mother to fall silent.

“Just come in for now.”

Ayu quietly entered her home, running into her father in the living room.

“What is that outfit?!”

Her father’s reaction overlapped with what her mother said, but he continued further.

“You walked here looking like that?”

“So what if I did?” Ayu calmly responded.

“The hell is that attitude…?” Her father showed signs of being upset as he raised his hips, but her mother reprimanded him to sit down again.

“…Have a seat.”

“I want something to drink.” Ayu opened the fridge and grabbed some cold tea, poured it into a cup, and gulped it down.

She went for a second cup, which helped her parched throat to cool down. She tried her best not to look into her parents’ eyes as she sat down. A long silence followed until her mother spoke up.

“…Welcome home.”

“…I’m back,” Ayu muttered.

“I said something horrible the last time we talked. I’m sorry.”

“?!”

Ayu was extremely bewildered to hear her mother’s apology.

“After you left, we both looked more into this whole LGBT thing.”

“Mom…”

“We shouldn’t be blaming you when you’re the one suffering the most.”

—*Suffering?*

She hated being pitied like that the most, but she tried to be positive since they at least tried to understand her feelings.

“Well…” Ayu’s father opened his mouth next. “I’m sorry for acting like you’re sick and trying to take you to a hospital.”

“…!”

He didn’t really show much emotion while saying so, but that might be the first time he had ever apologized to her. She felt like breaking out in tears. However…

“After looking into it, there are people in this world who get married despite being homosexual, right? So, we’ll just have to find a man who’s fine with you being gay. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Upon hearing that, Ayu felt like everything in front of her turned black.

—*What is this person saying?*

Beyond anger or frustration, sheer despair filled Ayu’s mind. She wanted to punch herself in the face for being emotional at her parents’ apologies ten seconds ago. They hadn’t tried to learn more about this whole thing for Ayu’s sake, they were just trying to drag her back to what they considered the correct path. They didn’t care about her feelings, they were just worried about how the world saw their family. For them, it was all about ‘Normal’ and ‘Proper’ and ‘It’s fine’ and ‘Don’t worry’ and ‘We’ll find someone’… Yet none of these words showed any respect for Ayu. Ayu tried her best to control the boiling rage inside of her as she opened her mouth.

“…You’re right, there’s a lot of people who get married to the opposite sex despite being gay.”

“Yeah.”

“Absolutely.”

She glared at her parents and then declared without hesitation.

“But I won’t get married to a man. In fact, I’m living together with the person I like in Tokyo.”

“W-What did you say?!”

“Th-The person you like? Could you mean Miyako-chan?”

Ayu shook her head.

“No.”

“Then who is it?!”

“My employer and roommate. I’m going out with her and we live together.”

Both her parents were shocked.

“What?! But I thought you were living with Miyako-chan…”

“And who is that? You said she’s your employer, right? Is she working? What job is it? What’s her age?”

Met with her father’s pressure, Ayu tried to remain calm as she answered.

“An author that Miya-chan oversees. She’s 23 years old.”

“You’re going out… with an adult…?!”

What irony that the person who talked about getting a marriage partner for Ayu now was fixated on age. It was so ridiculous, Ayu could only laugh. There was nothing else to talk about with them. Just breathing the same air as they made her feel nauseous. She stood up from her chair.

“Anyway, I’m going back to Tokyo.”

“Stop!”

“…”

Ayu ignored her mother’s plea and stepped out of the living room, when her father screamed.

“If you keep acting so selfish, we’ll report that woman to the police!”

“…!”

In that moment, Ayu realized the fatal mistake she had committed.

*

Late in the afternoon on the day Ayu and Miyako had gone back home, Yukari sat at her laptop in her office and ate a sandwich she had bought from the nearby convenience store. It had been three whole months since she’d last bought cheap convenience store food like this. The lobster meat sandwich was her favorite from that store, and she’d eat it at least once every three days before Ayu came over. And yet…

—It’s not tasty at all.

She thought to herself as she munched on the sandwich. She hadn’t had this in three months, so she expected it to be tasty, and yet it wasn’t satisfying in the slightest. Eating Ayu’s delicious homemade food daily, as well as eating out with her, might have dulled her taste, but the food she ate with her was always delicious. Did food lose all taste simply because Ayu wasn’t around? It’s not like they’d be separated forever. She just went home to see her family.

—Did she already make it home?

Yukari sent her a brief “You home already?” LINE message, which was read by Ayu immediately, but no response came.

—Ayu…?

Yukari felt a glimmer of worry in her heart, but she decided to focus on writing instead. This was the 6th day she had been working on her new work after being allowed a break from her regular series, but she hadn’t made any progress. Of course, her determination to write something new back then was genuine, but she didn’t have anything to go off of. She would just start writing whatever came to mind, but nothing felt good enough and she always deleted it all. It had been like this since she’d started working on it.

—How do you even write an amazing novel?

When she worked on her debut work ‘Search of the Heart,’ she just wrote whatever came to mind. She had no intention of creating something outstanding. Yet she had managed to win a prize and debut with a novel that was praised as talented and genius by many. Even when she worked on her next work ‘Humanity Fell to the Sickness called Immortality,’ her editor at the time, Takatomi, said that she could make something even more amazing, but Yukari mostly ignored her and wrote whatever she pleased.

After moving to Branch Hill, she wrote ‘Sonko’s Strategy of Love’ and ‘The Murder Detective Who is Unstable,’ and her stance was the same there, too. Since Miyako wouldn’t comment much on works that had a strict deadline, Yukari probably wrote a lot more leisurely than back at GF Bunko. ‘Loser Protagonist’ and ‘Everyone’s different, and I love everyone’ were more like the mass-produced novels you’d see nowadays, which had normal reincarnation and harem tropes, but she still wrote whatever she considered interesting.

—Why did I even decide to write something amazing in the first place?

Was it to fight Suhara Tomoka? Would writing an amazing novel even work in her favor compared to a popular idol and voice actress? Maybe then Ayu would think that Yukari is more amazing?

“I mean… Ayu doesn’t even read novels all that much.”

Yukari realized she had just blindly charged ahead without even thinking about a thing, so she stared up at the ceiling.

“I hope Ayu comes back soon.”

The moment she uttered those words, her phone vibrated. She thought it might be a message from Ayu so she quickly grabbed her phone. But when she checked her messages, it was actually one from Tomoka.

Sensei, my recording schedule for the afternoon fell flat, so would you mind if I came over?

Granted, that was the case the last time she showed up, but it was a common occurrence in the anime industry, so Yukari wasn't all that surprised.

Ayu isn't home today, though.

Oh, really? Where is she?

—I guess Tomoka-chan really is interested in her…

The last time she came over, she also looked for Ayu, but since Yukari was the legal owner of the flat, she had to go through her, surely.

She's gone back home to her family for a few days.

I see…

It took a few minutes before Tomoka's next response came.

Ayu-san said it was fine for me to come over even if it's just the two of us, so I'll see you later.

—Ayu responded to her message right away?

Also, why would Tomoka have to ask Ayu for permission? Many questions filled Yukari's head. Roughly 15 minutes later, Tomoka arrived, taken to the living room by Yukari, and offered some financiers with coffee.

"Here you go. Ayu made these, see."

Tomoka seemed somewhat restless, her eyes shooting wide open at that.

"Really? Financiers are something you can make yourself?"

"Well, she did struggle quite a bit to perfect it, I'll say."

Tomoka took a bite and a sip of tea. Then, Yukari spoke up.

"That live concert of yours was amazing. Thanks for inviting us."

"Y-You're welcome!" Tomoka's face lit up.

Even as a woman, Yukari couldn't help but find it attractive.

“And that speech was something else. Being so proud about it… I was surprised, to be honest.”

Tomoka must have understood immediately what Yukari was talking about.

“Actually, I was incredibly nervous. My legs were shaking, and I’m still surprised I managed to pull off the next song.”

“Yeah… It was incredible. It made realize that I could never beat you.”

Tomoka let out a faint smile.

“I mean, we’re fighting in completely different categories. And you’ve given us so many outstanding works.”

“That’s not what I meant… If you really wanted to take Ayu from me, I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“What?” Tomoka looked at Yukari in disbelief.

“I mean, you like Ayu, right?” Yukari said as Tomoka’s mouth shot open, together with her eyes.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!” She screamed with a volume that made the cup on the table shake. “Wh-Why would you think that I like Ayu-san?!”

“I mean… You heard that Ayu and I are dating, right?”

“That… Yes, I guess.”

“And you said that you’d be more worthy of a partner, right?”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?! I mean, well, I did but… Wait, why did I…?” Tomoka mumbled to herself.

“Um, Tomoka-chan?” Yukari carefully asked.

“Kairou-sensei! I didn’t mean it like that. I was saying that I’d be a better partner for you instead of Ayu-san! But I didn’t really honestly feel that way either! It was like a joke!”

“Really? …So wait, does that mean…?”

Yukari slowly began to understand the true meaning behind Tomoka's words. The girl blushed, and she raised her head and looked at Yukari.

"I didn't mean to tell you, but… I've liked you for the longest time, Sensei. Of course, in a romantic way."

"O-Oh… Well… I'm sorry…"

"Yes, well… don't mind me… Wait, why did I get turned into the loser heroine out of nowhere?" Tomoka mumbled with a gloomy expression.

"B-But… I do think you'd be better off with Ayu. She's closer in age… and she's got the same sexuality…"

Tomoka gave Yukari a dubious look.

"Sensei, are you being serious right now?"

"I mean, can you blame me for thinking that? I'm not a lesbian, so…"

"But you love Ayu-san, right?"

"I'm not so confident in that, either. The feelings Ayu has for me are probably different from what I have for her, and I don't know if what I feel is really love…"

Tomoka listened to Yukari for a bit, and then spoke up.

"All right, you big dummy."

"?!"

Yukari was bewildered to hear Tomoka drop her polite act.

"Are you that much of a moron?"

"T-Tomoka-chan…?"

Tomoka ignored Yukari's question and just sighed.

"It doesn't take a genius to tell how much you like her. You usually don't open up and aren't usually fine with getting drunk. I've never seen you like that before."

“But whether that’s love or not is…”

“So Sensei, would you be fine if Ayu-san and I had sex?”

“Se—”

Yukari imagined the sight of the two of them making out and flirting around. She felt like she’d break out in tears.

“N-No way in hell!”

“See?!”

“But what if I’m just greedy and jealous? That I don’t want someone important to me being taken away?” Yukari pondered on it further, and Tomoka flashed a wry smile.

“There’s really no point in trying to categorize every single emotion you feel. If you want to believe that your feelings for Ayu-san are love, then can’t you just accept that?”

Tomoka’s words struck Yukari like lightning.

“Can it really be that simple? I feel like when it comes to sexuality, it needs some proper self-evaluation.”

That’s why Ayu ran away from home and came to Tokyo.

“Maybe?” Tomoka just shrugged.

“Maybe?! I’m being serious here!”

“I think it’s fine like that, but I’m sure others would disagree. Some would probably reproach me for trying to infringe on their identity, and tell me to not make light of it.”

“But which is the proper one…?” Yukari mumbled to herself, feeling completely lost.

In response to that, Tomoka flashed an expression like she couldn’t believe what she had just heard.

“Sensei… Were you trying to live a proper life?”

Those words made Yukari feel like she had finally woken up from her slumber. But before she could really pinpoint what this meant, her phone vibrated.

“It must be Ayu!”

“Can you not make such a happy face? I’m incredibly jealous right now.” Tomoka pouted as Yukari checked her message.

I’m sorry, I won’t come home anymore, so let’s break up. Thank you for looking after me.

Upon reading that, Yukari froze up like an icicle. Tomoka stood up and checked the message herself.

“…Something must have happened. Let’s try calling her.”

“Y-You’re right.”

Yukari tried doing just that, but Ayu wouldn’t pick up. She then sent her a message asking ‘What’s going on?’ but it wasn’t even read.

“I’ll try calling her.”

The same result happened. Any LINE messages were ignored, too.

“…Mya-san went with her, so she might know something,” Yukari said and called Miyako.

…Hello?

Miyako’s voice sounded awfully heavy.

“Mya-san? Ayu said she wouldn’t come back anymore. Do you happen to know anything?”

Acchan just told me.

“Really?! What did she say?!”

Through the phone, Miyako’s sigh could be heard.

I didn't think you two were a thing, you know? That happened so quickly… She just confessed to me like four… no, maybe five years ago?

"That doesn't matter right now! Tell me what happened with Ayu!"

…Her parents found out that you two are living together, and that you were going out on top of that. So her father threatened her. He said that if she tried to run away again, she'd report you to the police.

"…And that's why she said we should break up. To protect me."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Yukari couldn't help feeling happy.

Honestly, I'm at a loss myself here. I'd like to help Acchan out, but you should just lay low for a bit.

"Mya-san, tell me the address to her parents' place."

Were you even listening to me?!

Upon hearing about Ayu's situation, Yukari made her decision almost instantly. She stood up while still on the phone as she rushed to Ayu's room and looked at the shelf. It was the same shelf they had made together, riddled with stickers. Opening a small box in there, she found Ayu's student ID from middle school.

"Ah, I found her address. Talk to you later."

Wait, Hika—

Yukari hung up her call with Miyako and called the next person. After a single beep, the person answered.

"Hey, Onii-chan? I need your car!"

The person on the phone was Yukari's older brother, who lived in America and owned a small residence in Tokyo where he had a sports car collection.

"I don't know the name, but I want a flashy one. Lamborghini? I think I've heard of that before. Yup, I'll take that one."

After clearing things up with her older brother and the manager of the other mansion, Yukari headed into the walk-in closet in her storage room. She took out the custom-made suit she got for the awards ceremony when she won the light novel award—which she had made to not look too naive considering she was still in high school back then—and started undressing in the changing room. But then…

“Excuse me? Can I possibly watch you change just for future reference? Hehe…”

Tomoka showed her face with a licentious expression. Normally, Yukari would have been fine giving her a bit of service, but now…

“Ayu would hate that, so no,” Yukari said and closed the door and put on her suit.

She did struggle a bit but eventually managed to put it on.

“Sensei… You’re dashing.”

As Yukari appeared from the changing room, Tomoka stared at her in a daze.

“It has gotten a bit tight around my belly, though.”

“That’s nothing to worry about. So where are you going?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Yukari flashed a smirk. “I’m going to pick up Ayu.”

She grabbed her emergency bag and put on glasses that were a deep black color. Roughly fifteen minutes after receiving Ayu’s message, Yukari left the flat. As if she had learned from Ayu storming out of her house, she left her home determined, but much more calmly and rationally.

*

I’m sorry, I won’t come home anymore, so let’s break up. Thank you for looking after me.

An evening had passed since Ayu sent Yukari that message. A single message came back from Yukari, but that was about it. Granted, it was after Ayu had rejected her so one-sidedly, but she still felt lonely. Since Tomoka went to her place as well, she might have gotten confessed to and accepted Tomoka instead. Obviously so, since Tomoka was a much better fit for Yukari. Ayu knew this, and yet her chest hurt. The reason she sparkled like that was because she worked so hard. But even so…

If Ayu were in a similar environment where the people would be willing to accept her sexuality… If she had been born into a wealthy family like Yukari's, she might have been loved by her siblings. If she had been born in the same family as Miyako, her parents would have been brainwashed into old morals. When she thought about it this way, she felt hurt, lonely, jealous, and close to breaking out in tears. But since she was born into this family, she was probably forced to live this miserable life forever. Her parents weren't listening, so she'd eat dinner in silence and cry to herself in her room until she'd eventually tire herself out and fall asleep. In the morning, she woke up and ate breakfast. She then hid in her room until it was time for lunch, just waiting for time to pass. Surely these days would continue forever.

—*I might as well just end it all.*

Up until now, Ayu had never understood people who chose to end their own lives. If they had the courage to end it, they might as well use that energy to fight against their current situation. If you were thinking of killing yourself because of bullying, you should just kill the other person instead. But now that she was in a similar situation, she realized that she never really understood their feelings. Once you have no more strength left, you lose even hostility and murderous intent. But just as she was falling into despair, she heard the sound of an engine outside.

"What?"

She looked outside the window, down at the street. A crazy sportscar was outside their front door. As the car revved the engine again, Ayu's father stormed outside.

"What the hell is your problem?!" He approached the car with a slightly scared voice as the door of the driver's seat opened vertically, and a single woman appeared. Although she was wearing a dress and black sunglasses, looking like a celebrity or company president, Ayu would never mistake that distinct hair color.

"Yukari-san!" Ayu screamed and stormed out of her room and out the front entrance.

Without even wearing shoes, she leaped at Yukari.

“It’s been a day, Ayu.” Yukari gently caressed Ayu’s head and sighed. “I swear, Shikoku is just way too far! I wanted to get here yesterday, but I got tired on the way and didn’t want to risk anything, so I stayed in Osaka for the night. I should’ve gone with a plane instead.”

“You came all the way from Tokyo with a car?! And just look at all the dents!”

The expensive car Yukari arrived in showed dents and scars all over.

“I’ve never driven a supercar like that, so I struggled a bit,” Yukari explained in a bashful tone.

“Why did you come here by car? And your outfit…”

“I figured my first impression is the most important one,” answered Yukari as she started walking toward Ayu’s father.

He, in return, seemed bewildered, and Ayu’s mother showed up from the front entrance. If Yukari’s intention was to threaten Ayu’s parents with her first impression, then it definitely worked out. Still wearing the sunglasses, Yukari formed a smile and politely greeted the two.

“You must be Ayu-san’s parents, yes? My name is Ebiwara Yukari. I have the honor of dating your daughter.”

“Wuh… Ah… yeah…”

Ayu’s father was utterly taken aback, just looking around in confusion.

“F-For now, come inside!” He said and escaped into the home.

Their neighbors were already glued to the windows, watching the situation unfold. Since Ayu’s father was concerned about his public image more than anything else, he probably didn’t want to cause a scene like that. Contrary to him, however, Yukari remained calm despite all the attention. Ayu admired this as she followed after them. After being led into the living room, Yukari and Ayu sat down at the table, facing Ayu’s parents.

“So, what brings you here?” Ayu’s father spoke forcefully, probably having regained his composure.

Yukari took off her sunglasses, and—

“Please give me your daughter,” she said without a glimmer of hesitation.

“D-Don’t give me that crap! You’re a woman!”

“Very true. But I love her, so…”

“I don’t care!”

“How about ten million yen, then?”

“What…?”

Both Ayu’s mother and father looked at Yukari in disbelief.

“Of course, I can’t pay you that money immediately, but if I sell my stocks for the Ebiwara Group and my flat, I can come up with at least ten million.”

“So what?! I won’t sell my daughter for money!”

This whole situation was probably too out of order for them to remain calm, but he still declined. Even Ayu had to agree with him.

“Leave! I was wondering what kind of promiscuous woman would poison my daughter, but you’re even crazier than I thought!”

“Then how about 15 million?”

“You’ve gone mad!”

Yukari showed a troubled expression.

“Hm… Honestly, the only thing I could offer for Ayu-san is money, so…”

“You won’t have her! And if you don’t go home, I’ll call the police! You… criminal! Laying your hands on a minor!”

“You’re right. It might be a crime, but if a genuine relationship has been accepted, it’s not a criminal offense by law.”

“Genuine? And how do you intend to prove that?!”

“If there’s an engagement in place, that’s proof of a genuine relationship.”

“Hah! Then this conversation is over. In Japan, same-sex marriage is not legally admitted.”

Yet Yukari remained calm.

“That is absolutely true. However, there is a certain partnership system, and if you file the right paperwork, even people of the same sex are admitted into a relationship similar to an engagement. Putting the law in place is in its early stage, and it most certainly is far from protecting minorities or such, but once Ayu-san is a grown adult, I plan on proceeding with this partnership system.”

“Yukari-san…!”

Of course, Ayu knew about this system, but she was shocked and surprised to learn that Yukari was thinking about their future so much she had looked into the law.

“S-So what? Our daughter still lives in your home! That way before you even started dating! That’s abduction!”

“But you agreed for Miyako-san to act as Ayu-san’s guardian, yes?”

“…Yeah.”

“She is my editor, and she consistently and constantly watches over me.”

Ayu knew that was a lie but she swallowed that comment.

“And so, she comes to my apartment often, even staying over. My home is Miyako-san’s second home, is what I’m trying to say.”

“D-Do you think that will hold up in court?”

“Please, I’m willing to listen to any objections you have. Go ahead and let’s go to court. I have a very talented lawyer,” Yukari emitted pressure while keeping her calm tone.

However, sitting next to her, Ayu could tell that her hand was shaking below the table. If this argument continued, Yukari would probably emerge victorious. Even if she got reported to the police, she could use the power of money to talk her way out of it. And… she could probably save Ayu, too. But, was this really the right thing to do? Leaving everything to Yukari… Will she be able to stand proudly next to Yukari from now and in the future?

“F-Fine, then we’ll do just that! Don’t come back crying when you regret it!” Ayu’s father glared at Yukari as he screamed.

“Yukari-san, that’s enough,” Ayu said.

“Ayu? What are you saying?” Yukari looked at Ayu in pain.

It seemed like she assumed Ayu had given up on trying. But that wasn’t it. Ayu didn’t want her to make that face. Ayu then glared at her father.

“You don’t have to talk with these people anymore.”

“Ayu…?”

Both Yukari and Ayu’s parents gave her a bewildered look. She, in return, started gasping for air and pushed out her words.

“I… I’m going to… k-kill these people!”

“Kill?! What in the world are you…?!”

“Ayu! How could you say that to your own mother and father?!”

Ayu’s parents were in utter shock.

“Shut up! You’re no longer my parents! If you try to ruin my life any more than this… I’ll slaughter the two of you!” Ayu got up from her chair and screamed.

But then, Yukari tapped her on the back.

“That’s not something a lady like you should say. If you did that, you’ll be branded a criminal. How am I supposed to go on without you?”

“Yukari-san…” Ayu sat back down and Yukari nonchalantly continued.

“If you really want to off them, you have to let a professional assassin handle it. Our company has no connections to anyone like that… yet. If I tried, I might be able to hire someone,” Yukari grinned, which only terrified Ayu’s parents more.

With her outfit, attitude, and expensive car just waiting outside, the fact that she would hire a trained killer suddenly didn’t seem all that unlikely.

“Wh-What the hell are you… Have all gay people gone insane?!” Ayu’s father screamed, but Ayu just narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t think you should be shouting homophobic nonsense like that. Plus, I’m straight. So the one who’s insane is me. I’m just a sociopath.”

Ayu’s father wanted to say something but nothing left his mouth.

“Enough! Just listening to you makes me sick!” Ayu’s mother seemed to have reached her limit and screamed. “Leave! You… and Ayu, you too! You’re not my daughter!”

—*Funny. Just earlier, I resented them so much, and yet…*

Hearing those words from her mother definitely stung. She even felt apologetic that they couldn’t reach an understanding. But even so…

“Let’s go, Yukari-san.”

Ayu tried her best to control her tears from coming out as she smiled at Yukari.

“Yeah,” Yukari nodded and stood up while holding Ayu’s hand.

Her mother was weeping to herself, whereas her father was glaring at her. Yukari bowed to the two of them and put on her sunglasses, heading outside the living room.

“…Are you really fine with this?” Ayu’s father asked.

This question lacked all the previous hostility, like he was genuinely worried. “Do you really think you can become happy? You can’t get married, you

can’t have children. The world will look at you in curiosity and contempt. Can you really be happy like that?”

It was a genuine question.

“Of course.”

“Naturally.”

Ayu and Yukari answered in unison, showing no hesitation whatsoever.

*

They entered Yukari’s car as the engine revved up.

“I sure am not looking forward to driving back ten whole hours…” Yukari sighed and Ayu responded with a smile.

“Then we can just stop by somewhere on the way. Maybe two or three stops, no?”

“That sounds great. I came all the way out here, so a bit of sightseeing shouldn’t hurt. Is there anything interesting in Ehime?”

“Nothing at all,” Ayu responded instantly.

“That can’t be true, right?”

“Well, our mandarins are pretty famous.”

“But we can buy those in Tokyo.”

“Yes. And the novel ‘Botchan’ is set here, too.”

“Oh yeah, I did see a sign about that on the way here.”

The setting for Natsume Souseki’s novel ‘Botchan’ is Matsuyama in Ehime for the most part, where the protagonist of the same name teaches at a middle school.

“There’s a statue and a sightseeing tour, I believe.”

“Have you read ‘Botchan,’ Ayu?”

“In school, yes.”

“It’s pretty odd. Despite the cheery and comedic atmosphere, it actually has a bad ending.”

Not being able to get along with students or teachers, the protagonist gets fired after having a fight with a colleague and returns to his hometown in Tokyo.

“It’s supposed to be based on Souseki’s actual life, right? I believe he actually talks rather negatively about Matsuyama in the novel, and yet they made it a base of tourism… The people here sure are something else.”

“That’s because we have literally nothing else here.”

Since Ayu made it perfectly clear she was not a fan of sightseeing in the local area…

“Then let’s stay over at Koube tonight.”

“Koube?! Yes, please! I’ve always wanted to go there! It’s an actual city!”

Ayu did a complete 180 and showed total excitement, so Yukari made her decision with a smile. They stopped at a nearby convenience store to buy some food and snacks and then put in a reservation at the members’ exclusive resort hotel in Koube. Once that was done, they blasted off in the car again. After a short while…

“Yukari-san, why did you do all of that?” Ayu asked out of the blue.

“Was it that much of a shock?”

“Absolutely. Why would you drive to Ehime by car? And you picked a fight with my parents.”

“Hee hee… Well, I guess you’re right.”

If things went south, she might have even gotten arrested. And worse, she could have put Miyako, the publisher, and even her own family in trouble.

“I just… remembered who I really am.”

“Who you really are?” Ayu tilted her head.

“Do you know why I decided to become a light novel author? The scum of society?”

“It’s not scum at all… I think it’s an amazing job,” Ayu added and then thought for a moment. “Maybe because you have talent?”

“I don’t mean to brag, but I have other talents, too. I was always good when it came to music and sports, and I’m pretty okay at drawing as well. If I wanted, I could have made it in other fields, and since my family is rich, I could’ve gotten by without working at all.”

“I think you’re not going to make many friends with that line. And honestly, that even kind of pisses me off.”

“But it’s the truth, so what can I say?” Yukari flashed a wry smile.

Ayu sighed faintly.

“So… Maybe you like writing novels?”

“Does it look like I do?”

“…Not in the slightest,” Ayu said with a troubled smile.

Yukari smiled.

“I don’t like to write, but I like the name ‘Light Novel’, actually.”

“The name? So the genre?”

“Yep, **Light Novel**.”

It allows a single person’s brain and fingertips to create a world, create people, create a story, god or devil, even a whole universe. You can easily put it into words, and destroy it just as quickly. The only place where such a thing is allowed is the world of light novels. Because you’re talented, you should be doing this. Because you have money, you should be doing that. Because you’re beautiful, that’s how you behave. In this world that emphasizes

righteousness, Yukari always felt bored. That’s why she started writing back in high school.

“I just want to fight what is righteous.”

‘Search for the Heart’ tells the story of protagonists living a normal youth despite going through organ transplantation.

‘Humanity Fell to the Sickness called Immortality’ details the work of a protagonist committing terrorist acts after the world and its population became immortal.

‘Sonoko’s Strategy of Love’ shows the mental warfare of the female protagonists who use the other person’s love to accomplish their own.

‘The Unsolved Cases of the Murder Sensitive Detective’ is a mystery series of evil and blood about entering someone else’s privacy after obtaining a superpower.

‘I Was Reincarnated As The Strongest Loser Hottie Protagonist’ is a story about righteousness after you’ve been stripped of your role.

‘Everyone’s Different, and I Love Everyone’ is a standard light novel about a harem romcom that breaks conventional societal rules.

LIGHTNESS to resist **RIGHTNESS.**

This was the concept for every one of Yukari’s series so far. But the ones who realized this probably were only a small group of passionate fans, just like Suhara Tomoka.

“Basically, I’m a sociopath. I’m a delinquent to the bone,” Yukari said with a self-deprecating smile.

Ayu gazed at her for a moment and then gave a mischievous grin.

“Then we’re the same. I’m a useless daughter whose parents hate her.”

“I guess that’s true.”

Ayu’s smile made Yukari feel like she was above the clouds. Is this what happiness was? Granted, she had confidently spoken to Ayu’s father when he asked if they could really become happy, but there was no telling if it was true. There was no way her parents would really cut off any contact after this, and who knew how Yukari’s family would react? Maybe Miyako would get angry at them? And there was always a chance of their feelings changing in the future. But in return, same-sex romance could become more accepted in the future, and with more scientific progress, they could even make children without the need for artificial insemination.

However, whether it was love between women, love between men, or love between a man and a woman, the future was always uncertain. That’s why this whole life isn’t a special story. Just a regular story of one person falling in love with another. That’s what Yukari decided. To wish for it to be this way, and to do everything in her power to make that happen.

A month after returning home with her beloved one, breaking deadline after deadline, the light novel author Kairou Hikari finally finished her new novel. The title was ‘To Bear Love.’ And the story began with a single line.

“This is the average and commonplace love story of a lonely person who manages to break free from loneliness.”

The End

Afterword

Apologies for leaving such a large gap between this and the first volume. I’m the resident deadline breaker Hirasaka Yomi. I would be delighted if you enjoyed the second volume of ‘Shimekiri Mae ni wa Yuri ga Hakadoru.’ With this volume, the story is concluded (although I wanted to split it into two parts but because of publishing reasons, it ended up being regular volume numbers instead). To my surprise, BigGanGan started a comic serialization, and if the novel and manga sell well, I might bring out a third volume. In fact, I always felt like writing a love story for the new character Suhuara Tomoka.

Now then, thank you U35-sensei for all the wonderful illustrations of Ayu and Yukari. Thank you to my editor at GA for understanding my thoughts despite me breaking more deadlines than I can count. My thanks also go to my proofreader, and everybody else involved with the release of this novel, as well as all the people who read this series. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The middle of September 2021, Hirasaka Yomi

The Progress of Yuri is Especially Fast Before the Deadline
(切前には百合が捗る)

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